

# Summer Garden

James Milne

November 2019

## Contents

Summer Garden	6
Trei	7
Summer	10
Alphege	13
F'rir	14
Ashwen	15
Trei	17
Alphege	20
Azrael	22
Summer	24
Janus	25
Summer	26
Trei	28
Yio	29
Summer	30
Trei	33
Rendi	35
Summer	36
Astrian	38
First	42

CONTENTS	2
Summer	44
Trei	46
Luna	49
Summer	50
Janus	54
Trei	55
Summer	56
Vastras	58
Astrian	59
Ashwen	62
Trei	65
Rendi	68
Janus	69
Luna	70
Janus	72
Alphege	73
Summer	76
Luna	81
Summer	83
Ashwen	85
Claven	86
Trei	89
Astrian	90
Yio	93
Luna	95
Rendi	96
Yio	98

CONTENTS	3
Azrael	99
Trei	101
Luna	104
Ashwen	106
Astrian	108
Claven	109
Summer	110
Vastras	112
Astrian	113
Janus	115
Luna	116
Trei	117
Summer	119
Astrian	121
Luna	122
Vastras	124
Luna	126
Trei	128
Luna	130
Summer	133
Vastras	134
Claven	136
Summer	138
Vastras	140
Azrael	141
Ashwen	143
Trei	144

Summer	145
Vastras	146
Summer	147
Rendi	148
Claven	150
Azrael	152
Summer	155
Luna	156
Vastras	158
Summer	159
Luna	162
Azrael	163
Rendi	165
Claven	167
Summer	168
Vastras	170
Azrael	171
Luna	172
Rendi	173
Trei	174
Luna	175
Alphege	176
Azrael	179
Alphege	180
Ashwen	184
Luna	185
Trei	187

<b>Luna</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Claven</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Rendi</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Vastras</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Luna</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Azrael</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Ashwen</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>Yio</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>Luna</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Azrael</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>Trei</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Claven</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Alphege</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Vastras</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>Astrian</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>Azrael</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>Vastras</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>Alphege</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>Azrael</b>	<b>218</b>
<b>Luna</b>	<b>220</b>
<b>Alphege</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>Luna</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>Claven</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>Summer</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Luna</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Summer</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Claven</b>	<b>234</b>

Ashwen	235
Yio	236
Summer	238
Ashwen	240
Alphege	242
Trei	243
Ashwen	245
Trei	246
Tyr	247
Trei	248
Sarin	251
Trei	253
Luna	255
Alphege	256
Astrian	257
Summer	259
Tyr	260
Yio	261
Alphege	263
Claven	265
Summer	267
Sarin	269
Sequel	270

## Summer Garden

---

## Trei

His head hurt. That was the first sensation that came back to him. The beating of his heart pumping pain through the edges of his skull. Pounding away.

He went to lift his arms to his face, but as lightning stabbed through him, he decided that had been a terrible idea.

He tried not to flinch as the pain slowly poured over him like molten metal entering into a mould, moving from his brain towards his toes.

His brain was waking up slowly, still trying to piece things together. Clearly something had gone badly wrong. Really badly.

He tried to open his eyes but flinched as the light blazed down. Apparently he wasn't ready for that yet.

What had he been doing?

As he reached for his memories they seemed to evaporate like smoke. Fragments were all that were left. An image of a stone well, drifting like a leaf caught in a breeze. He didn't recognise it, or where it was from. It just seemed to be somewhat random. He couldn't remember why he might have walked by a well. The thing had been old too - but he lived in one of the most modern cities in the world.

Calis. A city founded to be free of politics, to focus solely on the improvement of the world. It wasn't entirely successful, but the Science Council did manage to be fairly even-handed. Creating a technological utopia, of sorts, where research and the freedom to explore new ideas was the core ideal.

He wasn't much of an inventor himself, just a drone slowly fulfilling the repetitive and mind-numbing work that those kinds of projects inevitably needed. Cutting stones for alchemists, to the various specifications of wildly varying detail. Going into the mines day after day, searching for the coal and minerals. Grindstone spinning to sharpen the seventy-fifth dagger of the day.

The face of a girl swam into his mind for a moment. A customer. She'd come in asking for runestone preparation. Break down the blade into the core components, clean each up to an incredibly high standard, and then reassemble. One of the most painstaking and boring jobs he could possibly do. She was cute though, and wanted to sit and watch, so he'd been talking to her. Or rather, he'd been attempting. She'd laughed at him a few times. Not with. It was just his kind of luck.

He opened his eyes slowly, glaring blearily at the sun overhead in the sky. He couldn't see anything else, just a cloudless blue sky and an extremely bright yellow ball of flame.

What had happened after the girl? He'd handed her the dagger, all ready for runestone application... And then something had happened. Something important. He winced, his headache driving painfully sharp blades into his skull. This was important, he had to remember. It was urgent. Life or death.

His eyes widened. A thief stealing the blade. The girl turning in surprise as he'd dashed off after them trying to impress her. A yelled phrase, and then a blast of incredibly hot wind. He crashed into the thief, swept off his feet.

He ignored the pain, holding up his hands and wincing as he saw blistered skin. Someone had tossed a fireball through him into the thief.

Magic wasn't unheard of, but it was rare. Most magic users were conscripted into the King's Army and turned into weapons of war. They were placed on the front-lines of the battlefield, fighting until they lost all humanity and either committed suicide or let themselves be destroyed. There was no soul in the veterans of the front-lines. If returned, they were unable to live in society. That was the brutality that led to the formation of Calis. Trying to escape the politicians turning amazing discoveries into bloody meat grinders.

A magic user had attacked him.

He rolled over with effort, landing face-first in some grass, wincing as he felt a blade flicked a piece of skin from his face. The grass was vibrantly green, the contrast stark as a droplet of blood fell from his face and moved down it slowly. It was healthy, and well-tended. He had to be in a garden of some sort. Maybe he'd landed in someone's backyard? The street had been nothing but dust and mud.

He shuffled his knees painfully, and pushed himself upright. He shivered, his arms holding himself as he realised he wasn't wearing any clothes. Maybe the sun being overhead wasn't too bad. It was keeping him relatively warm at least.

He stared in surprise, seeing the old well in front of him. So he'd remembered passing out here, then. It really was old. The mortar was crumbling, and white. Most wells today used a kind of tar mixed with small stones. It set black, and lasted for years. It had been invented by one of the more eccentric creators of the city, a man who'd been placed on permanent house arrest after attempting to kill the president at his own medal ceremony. The inventions had kept coming though. The wonders of Vinadras.

"Oh. It's awake."

He turned his head, wincing as the headache made the world spin for a moment. He stared in surprise as the double vision faded. The voice had been of a woman, not one he'd met. She was a redhead, a complete rarity in the city. She was sitting on a wall nearby, cross-legged, sipping tea from a gold-edged cup.

His jaw dropped as a flash of movement caught his eye. On her back, were two nearly-transparent purple wings. They were about half her height, but spread out would be much wider than she was tall.

He swallowed nervously, "You're... Fae." His voice was surprisingly raspy, as if he wasn't used to speaking. It had emerged in croaks and grunts that seemed to offend the picturesque place he was in, an affront to the beautiful and incredibly rare creature in front of him. In fact, he hadn't believed the Fae were real. The original founders of the world, according to some myths. They were the ones who had first taught man to use magic, and taught them that the natural world could be controlled. Adapted to create cures for disease. They had taught humanity the first principles of natural philosophy. The myths never explained why the Fae had vanished, or why no one had ever found a corpse or fossil of this radically different race.

The woman nodded her head politely, "And I assume you think you're human, then?"

He frowned, his head still foggy and struggling to make sense of what she'd said, "... Yes?"

"You're not." The woman replied flatly, and then sipped her tea.

He swallowed nervously, "I'm... Not?"

She sighed with frustration and put down her tea, "Waking up is always the most annoying part. Look, you died. You got toasted by a mage. She murdered your ass because you were in an



inconvenient location.”

He nodded slowly, “. . . A she?”

“The girl you were irritating.” The woman replied.

He blinked slowly, “Oh. The customer.”

She nodded curtly, “Correct. So, you got killed. Then they dumped your body in the Pit. No one paid for a funeral. No one cared.”

The Pit. A place where organic matter was disposed of. Animals turned inside out by experiments, the remains of organ donors, and the poor. It was a horrifying, perpetually burning pile of rotting flesh kept on the edge of town, as far from the rich as it could get. Couldn’t have the smell distracting their brilliant minds.

He looked at her in surprise, “So how am I here?”

“My fault.” The woman shrugged, “I sneezed over the Pit. I was supposed to just be passing through.”

He shook his head slowly, “Nope. Not getting it.”

She sighed heavily, “Recently dead you got a face full of fairy dust. You know, the root of all magic?”

He scratched his head, “Dust? How is dust the root of magic?”

She stared at him in surprise, “Aw hell. You aren’t a magic user, are you?”

He shrugged, “Second one I met killed me. First one conscripted me.”

The Fae looked surprised, “There aren’t many magic users in your world?”

“They get turned into soldiers.” He said sadly, and then looked at her, “You really are a Fae, aren’t you?”

She sighed and stood up, smoothing her dress, “Well, that’s enough of all that. So, I brought you back. You’re. . . Kinda tied to me now. But, you get a second life. So. . . What’s your name?”

“Trei.” He replied, forcing himself to stand up, before falling over, unable to keep his balance.

“Well, Trei.” The Fae began as she walked towards him, “You’re a Ghoul now. Not quite human, not quite dead. Immortal, but your body will never heal. So, take care of it. The body is still dead, its just had a soul rammed back inside it.”

He looked up at her, “And your name?”

“Summer.” She replied, tiredly, “Can you work out how to stand yet?”

He shook his head, “It feels. . . Weird.”

“Well, I’ve got things to do. I’ll be back. If you manage to stand, there’s a house. Wait inside.” Then she turned and Trei’s jaw dropped as the air in front of her seemed to ripple for a moment, like the surface of a lake, and then she was gone.

She’d just left him alone in who-knows-where, too weak to stand.

He sighed.

---

## Summer

The room was bustling with whispering when Summer arrived. The pillars of the room were inlaid with bronze and gold, twisted into the shapes of trees stretching up from the ground to form the roof overhead, and dipping down into the crystalline chandelier, where balls of blue flame danced slowly.

Her feet touched the ground softly, and those gathered around the table immediately went silent. Her wings snapped backwards and she tried to keep her arms by her sides as she nervously approached the Council. The other Fae all stared at her, some with looks of horror, some with looks of awe. She fought the urge to swallow and took her seat slowly. She turned to the Fae standing beside her and nodded slightly.

The man banged a fist on the table, "The Seven-hundredth and Eighty Sixth Council of the Queen is called to order. Janus has called as Arbiter, he may present."

A blue-haired figure stood up slowly, placing his hands on the wooden table delicately, yet all the same smoke emerged from the wood. "I am Janus, Guardian of the Realms. The Queen has charged me with protecting the paths in and out of this world. Today I observed a member of this Council accompanying the body of a... Human... Into our Realms."

He'd nearly choked on the word 'human', and the others had flinched. Their hatred of humankind was well-earned. All of them had lost family in the wars with the mortals. All of them bore their own injuries. There was no reason for any of them to feel pity or responsibility for a race of people that was well on its way towards exterminating themselves.

Summer folded her hands, and looked at the man who had stood against her so many times, knowing she'd just given him the fuel he'd needed to remove her. "I did."

The others all turned to her in surprise, and Janus went to begin a tirade, but she held up a hand. "I claim the right of Durian."

The Council froze. All of them were too terrified to speak or breathe, to get caught in between these two figures. It was her right to claim. Janus couldn't oppose it, if it was her willing choice. There was exactly nothing he could do. Yet the implications were insane. The precedent this could set could fracture not just the Council, but the entirety of the Realms.

There would be no Fae unaffected by this, no Fae without an opinion.

Janus nodded slowly, "As Arbiter, I request an explanation, and yield the floor." He bowed stiffly, respectfully, and took his seat.

All eyes were on her, and she knew her every action would directly effect her future. She could stand and answer as if she were being charged, or she could stay seated and remind Janus just who he was speaking to.

She remained sitting.

"It was an accident, of sorts. I went to the human world to collect materials for my work. Coal, mainly. My Realm is facing a distinctive shortage of the material since the annexation of the mountains by our Arbiter." She began, speaking factually, without the deep hatred she felt towards Janus for stealing a part of her world. The Council had already ruled on the matter, with Janus utilising an ancient and obscure rule that allowed the Arbiter to steal lands from the other Council members. If this were to work, then she needed to turn public opinion in her favour.

"Whilst there, I sneezed." She said with a shrug. It wasn't exactly an unusual happening. Plenty of Fae experienced various allergies to the climates of the human world. It was little explanation

however. “In doing so, I prevented a soul from leaving the body of a mortal. He had recently been killed, a murder.”

The others barely reacted. They all viewed the humans as endlessly violent creatures to begin with. Her story was making sense to them, but it wasn’t explaining her reason for calling the right. “When I touched the mortal, intending to release his spirit, I saw him. I saw his aura, and history, pass before me.”

Janus looked up at her in surprise, and raised his hand, “Pardon the interruption. I wasn’t aware that foresight or inner sight were among your gifts. Is this a recent development?”

“I do not have the gift.” Summer said smiling, “Arbiter, for those on the Council who may not be aware, can you explain why such a thing might happen?”

He swallowed nervously, and Summer suppressed a grin. The uncomfortable man spoke slowly, “The only known manifestations of temporal magic in those who do not have a gift for it, is one of two things. Either the permanent and irrevocable entangling of two souls in one creature, the birth of a chimera... Or the meeting of two souls that have always been destined for each other.”

She nodded slowly, “As I am here, and he is not, there can be but one explanation. I could not leave the mortal in his world, nor cleave his soul from his body. To do so would disrupt my own soul and damage my Realm beyond repair. Thus, there can only be one responsible action I can take, both for the Realm, and this Council. I am entangled with this mortal, and thus, to preserve the peace, he must be my husband.”

The room was silent as each Fae considered the options. Some would be wondering if it wouldn’t preserve the peace more to erase the mortal’s soul and force her own reincarnation. It was an option with precedent, but peace wouldn’t be preserved. She would be unable to lead the Council as a newborn, and so a power struggle would ensue. Janus would likely seize control, but it would be a violent war. A thing that was absolutely repugnant to all Fae.

They could also delay, require examination of her and the mortal. In the meantime Janus as Arbiter would take control of the Council. In the short time he was there he would be able to implement a large number of the policy changes he wanted. He could change the balance of power, so that even if the Council didn’t disagree with her, Janus might be able to seize control in all but name.

Or they could preserve the status quo. A marriage was a big event, but it was one that could be spun easily to the public, especially if the mortal was her soulmate. It would be easy to justify to each of their worlds, and give them excuses to increase the number of political events, parties and dinners where they could make deals and treaties without the pressure of the public spotlight.

The Fae she’d first nodded spoke, “The Council will now vote. We begin with Kru.”

A pink-winged Fae stood up to the left of Summer, “As representative of the Kruei, my word is irrefutable. My word is the will of the Realm. The Right of Durian cannot be denied. I vote in favour of granting.”

And so it began, one by one, each Fae naming their right and voicing their opinion. The Council was divided. Some voted in favour, and some against. Some refused to meet her gaze, and others openly glared at her. Summer noted each action, knowing that they were all preludes to the tangle of politics that was to come.

The vote was nearing its end, and Summer felt her heart fluttering. It looked like the vote would be without a majority, in which case the deciding vote would be passed to the Arbiter. There

was another chance after that, but it wasn't one she wanted to employ. It would turn the Council against her, and likely mean the end of peace in the Fae Realms.

The Fae beside her sighed, "The vote is tallied. Twelve for, ten against and one abstaining. There is no clear majority. However, a majority exists. Arbiter, do you wish to cast your vote? Or shall you abstain from employing your role?"

Janus stood, placing his hands carefully behind his back, "I would like to speak, before answering."

"It is your right."

The Arbiter nodded slowly, "The Realm has clearly become endangered. A human is amongst us. This is a threat to the very peace we have all worked towards since the First Council was formed. A human has once before come among us, and he slaughtered our kind. I have stood as our protector for centuries. No mage can claim breaching the barriers upon our world. The Right of Durian is the right of every Fae. To marry those they love, to spend their life with them. I agree, and would not dare to threaten such a precedent. However, if the Right is to be granted, then restrictions must be placed upon this newcomer. He does not know our laws, or our ways. He may prove to be as dangerous as the one the humans call Hero. Thus, I do vote in favour of granting the Right, but I also ask the Council to consider a motion to restrict the newcomer and his bride-to-be, until such time as he has acclimated to our ways."

Summer struggled to stop her hands curling into fists. There was nothing unreasonable in what Janus was demanding. He was even being generous - accepting her claim at face value without even checking it. But in the name of security he was proposing cutting off her Realm from the rest of the Fae, effectively ejecting her from the Council and seizing power, even if it were for a limited time like he was claiming. . . The Council would never believe that a human now belonged.

The Fae beside her turned, "Such a motion is unusual. Will you hear it, my queen?"

Summer stood up slowly, "I accept the Arbiter's extensive knowledge on the security of the Realms, but I will not permit my soulmate to be treated as anything less than anyone else in the Realms. I will take full responsibility for his actions, as any bride should."

There was the clincher. All Janus needed to do to ruin her forever was bait the human into committing a horrifying crime. He was human, and stupid, and without magic. This would be difficult.

---

## Alphege

The elf broke through the barrier quickly, the spear in her hand moving in a fluid motion and stopping just short of the Fae's throat.

He turned his cold black eyes towards her, and outstretched a hand, "If you kill me, elf, then I will be unable to stop the corruption I have begun."

She glared, flicking her eyes towards the indicated tree root.

A sense of horror swept through her, though she remain perfectly serene on the outside. The creature was not lying. The presence of death had begun, and would sweep through the entire tree, poisoning the realm and all magic within it. Black dust tumbled from the bark.

"Why have you done this, Fae?" She demanded, her hands steady on her weapon.

He smiled, those dead eyes peering somewhere beyond her, "Because it was necessary. You will find yourself quite unable to reverse it. The magic I have used is not magic your people possess an understanding of."

She pulled the spear back, "This is an act of war, Fae."

"I am not Fae." He shrugged, "Well, not really. You should know."

She knew. She could see it in his eyes, and his aura. This was a creature that was once Fae, but now he was something else. Not eternal, not mortal. Somewhere in-between, and out of shape. He did not belong to this timestream, and could not remain. He would be pulled back, back to the place between life and death.

"You are Tyr." She growled angrily, "How can I undo this?"

"I do not plan to aid you." He grinned, "This is my challenge, little elf. Let us see what you do."

---

## F'rir

She ran a brush through her hair, pulling out the knots and glanced over at her sister, “You look concerned, Yio.”

The other shrugged uncertainly, “Something is... Off, F'rir.”

She plucked a broken strand of pink hair and dropped it, as it dissolved in the air, “That is vague of you, sister.”

Yio shrugged, “I don't know what to call it. Things are different. The 'verse is weird. Like something new has happened. Something unexpected. I feel almost as if...”

F'rir's face went white. She could feel it.

“The strands of fate are moving.” She said anxiously, “Rebinding, reshaping. The future is becoming its own. How? How is this possible? Is one of the celestials moving against us? No one would break the treaty... Would they?”

Yio stood up, her face flashing red, “Crap. I found the problem, and now it's mine as well.”

F'rir looked at her sister blushing in confusion. Yio wasn't modest, and had taken a number of lovers throughout her indeterminably long lifespan. What could get her so bothered?

A small fragment of red caught F'rir's eye, a thread. It was moving in the air, one tendril slowly wrapping around Yio's wrist, the other end extended towards the Evening Realms.

“Don't!” Yio yelled, grabbing her attention, “Looking at the mortal was all it took.”

F'rir winced, “A mortal. So this is it. The dead one's plan is in motion.”

Yio nodded, grinding her jaw angrily, “I feel like a fly in a spider's web.” She yanked on the thread around her wrist and shook her head, “I have no idea how to get out.”

F'rir tapped her chin, “Big sister might know. It's about time the three of us prepared, anyway. The dead one can't be allowed to succeed.”

---

## Ashwen

An older Fae, wings dull and eyes duller, sat by a fireplace, reading a series of dancing inscriptions in the air, or rather he was experiencing them. They were memory packets, crafted and sent by his various connections throughout the realm. This was a daily occurrence, a habit she'd never tried to break. She moved around him silently, preparing. Hot nectar, a saucer of peppermint leaves, and a small disc of amber. It wasn't an overtly courageous or outgoing meal, nor did appear at first glance to be even difficult to obtain, yet she always put her effort into it. To reward him for his diligent work on behalf of the Fae.

Lord Ashwith brushed aside the dust in the air, dismissing it, and grunted disapproval.

Ashwen quickly moved to his side, "Is there anything you desire, Father?"

"Sit." He waved dismissively, "I've been reading the memories of some of the council members. Yours were not among them, so I would have your words. The Right of Durian."

Ashwen shrugged, uncertain what kind of answer he wanted. "It is the Queen's right, as it is every Fae."

"Never before has a Fae been bound to... A non-Fae." He choked as he nearly said 'human'.

She nervously chewed on a strand of her brunette hair, "No, but if the Queen has said it, then I expect the Arbiter would have verified it. I can't see him accepting a lie from our queen, can you?"

Lord Ashwith frowned, "The Lord Arbiter is just, it is true, but he is not without fault, child. What was it, three lifetimes ago, when he promised you would be a member of his household, forever? Well it appears forever comes and goes in the eyes of the Arbiter a lot faster than it does in my own."

She felt her eyes water at the memory, threatening to burst open the floodgates. Janus had promised he would love her, and then basically ignored her for the rest of that lifetime. It had been a mistake. For both of them. One she would probably make again in a heartbeat, to the disappointment of the man in front of her. "Can it be verified, sir?"

Ashwith frowned, "I am not certain. It has been many lifetimes since any Fae claimed the right. We gave up on the mere idea of it a long time ago. Not everyone is fated to another."

Ashwen tapped her chin, "Is it possible for the Queen? I mean, she does have some differences in the eyes of the Fates. Would they dare to bind her?"

"A decent point of interest." Ashwith nodded slowly, picking up his nectar, "I wonder what this marriage will mean for Faen society. We will have a king, for the first time since the Lord Arbiter ruled when the queen was a child. He only ruled once, a very long time ago. I cannot imagine he would be happy to have a... A mortal on the throne. To be forced to allow a mortal to join us in council."

Ashwen blinked, "Will the king be granted lands? Realms? He can't sustain them. Mortals don't tend to have magic, do they? Will someone have to act as his steward?"

"The law does have rules and rights relating to the bride of our queen." Ashwith said slowly, "If I recall correctly, he will be granted nothing of his own, but rather become the steward of the queen. All rights and responsibilities that entails will be granted."

Ashwen scratched her head, "How could a mortal stand guard over the Channels of the Garden? I am not certain our laws are adequate to deal with this situation. I don't think the first council ever considered they would welcome a mortal into their embrace."

“We have not yet embraced him.” Ashwith cautioned, “Yes, it seems accommodations must be made for the king to be. What they are will probably be decided by our council. It is worth thinking about. After all, you are Lady Ashwen, not merely a member of my household. You have your own responsibilities as peoples. Do you believe they will embrace this new bride?”

Ashwen shrugged, pulling her hair out of her mouth, “Where you lead, they will follow. My people are small, and do not believe they have significance. They will look to the larger realms, and older Fae, to give them advice. Our biggest trade is lumber. I don’t think that will significantly change whether or not the Queen’s consort is accepted.”

“It might.” Ashwith replied, “Lumber can be broken down and used for spears and arrows. War would profit your people, even as it brings the horror in its wake. Some of your people may realise this, and wish to continue the unrest.”

Ashwen flinched, “I will do my best to prevent that.”

“Indeed.” Ashwith nodded, “We must always be on our guard. The heart is the most fickle of all. The most dangerous thing we must contend with. It is for that reason we must always show caution, a caution that our queen appears to be lacking. The mortal is unproven. We must devise a test.”

---



## Trei

The door creaked open behind him, and he felt it hit his feet. “Hi.”

He heard a stifled giggle, and then the woman walked in front of him and crouched, looking at his face. “So, run out of steam, then?”

Trei smiled somewhat pathetically, “Yup.”

Summer sat down cross-legged, “Well, whilst you’re stuck there and can’t run away, you and I need to have a bit of a serious talk. See... Bringing you back to life was illegal. So was bringing you home.”

Trei winced, “I don’t like where this is going.”

“Neither do I.” Summer said with a sigh, “Look, I had a choice between killing your body, and leaving you a disembodied soul for all eternity, or giving you a semblance of a life. I know which one sounds more like torture to me.”

Trei sighed, “What’s the catch? Am I going to prison for the next hundred years?”

“No.” Summer winced, her breathing changing pace as she tried to force herself to speak, “You... And I... Have to... Get married.”

Trei’s eyes widened in surprise as the woman blushed and looked away from him. “I’m sorry, okay?”

He sighed heavily, “They’re making you marry me? That... Doesn’t make sense to me. It’s not like I got you pregnant.”

“Geeze!” Summer exploded, launching to her feet and starting to pace, “Look, can’t you just be happy you’re alive? I’m the one who has to marry an undead ghoul who can’t even walk!”

Trei winced. He was pissed. It wasn’t like he’d been asked to be dragged back from the dead. He certainly didn’t want to marry a mythical creature, not straightaway. She was cute... But... He’d just met her. And the last cute girl he’d met had killed him with a fireball. However, his heart wasn’t in it. He could see how erratic and upset she was. Not the calm woman he’d seen sipping tea whilst she waited for him to wake up.

“When?” Trei asked quietly.

Summer paused, smiling at him sadly, “Ceremony is a week from now.”

“Do we have to have one?” Trei asked, and Summer nodded, “Yeah. And it’s going to be huge. Look... There’s a lot I haven’t told you. And I’m really not ready to tell you just yet. I’m still... Processing. The short of it, is you need to stay in the house for now. I’ve got some... Motivated enemies. They’re looking for you to screw up. Break a law, or insult the wrong person... And we aren’t human. Our laws, and our culture are worlds apart. You don’t know what it’s like to live here yet.”

Trei felt a finger twitch and dragged an arm slowly up towards his face, lifting his chin, “So... I’m your servant, and your prisoner. A slave.”

Summer winced, “I know I screwed up, Trei. You don’t need to rub it in. They’re watching me too.”

He stopped himself from an angry retort, seeing how hurt she was. The Fae was fighting back tears. She was terrified of something. Hurting. “I’m sorry.”

The Fae paused and shook her head, “You’re a kind one. Is that... Rare?”

Trei rolled his head sideways, “Huh?”

“For humans.” Summer replied and then frowned, “Last human to come to the Fae... Sort of butchered us all. He killed three thousand of us. His name was Hero.”

Trei blinked, “Hero? Like the Warrior-King Hero?”

“Yeah.”

Trei shivered, “Wow. So if he’s your experience... Then I’d guess you all think humans are kinda monstrous. He was the most bloodthirsty king our world ever knew... My city was founded to try and escape from the rule of kings. The founders just wanted the wars to... Stop. To find a way for humanity to coexist, and improve itself.”

Summer sat down on her knees slowly, “Really? That’s impressive. I had no idea that humanity had advanced to that level of understanding and philosophy yet. We try not to interact much with your kind.”

Trei used his hand to flip himself onto his back. One of his legs got tangled and didn’t quite make it, but it was more comfortable than digging his chin into the wooden floorboards. “The experiment isn’t working, not altogether. It’s an attempt. We’ve managed well enough, creating new technologies... Medicines. The plague is no longer a death sentence, if it is caught early. We can send messages through light in the air. But... The politics is still awful. Planning permits are impossible to get. Paint your store the wrong colour and the Fire Defence Force will burn it down rather than protect you. You still have to pay the leaders, but they don’t use that money to build roads or maintain things.”

Summer smiled at him, “Politics never dies, Trei. All your technology is pathetic next to magic. I know you don’t have much in your world but... We don’t have disease anymore. We don’t have hunger or thirst. With dust... Anything is possible. Well, almost anything. And yet, despite all this... My world is on the edge of war, dealing with a politician trying to seize control of the Council. He stole a part of this Realm. Just took it out of this dimension and into his. Including the three and half thousand Fae that were under the mountains when he moved it.”

Trei stared at her, “If you don’t have hunger or thirst... What’s the point? What is he trying to do?”

“Take power.” Summer said with a half smile, “That’s an end all on its own. Some people just... Want to be able to look down on everyone else.”

Trei sighed heavily, “Can’t your... Council, was it? Stop him?”

“He’s on the Council.” Summer smiled, “Its all politics.”

The ghoul nodded slowly, “Well... I’m sorry. Say... Just to talk about something less depressing... Do I need to eat anymore?”

Summer went pale, “I was really hoping you wouldn’t ask that. In short, yes... Eh... You’re a carnivore now. Ghouls eat dead things.”

Trei frowned, “Can I cook it at least?”

Summer cocked her head, “Sure? ... You aren’t grossed out by eating dead things?”

“Its just meat, right?” Trei asked in surprise, “Humans eat meat.”

“Ew.” Summer said with a shiver, unable to stop herself, “Do humans eat normal things too?”

Trei shrugged, "What do you mean by normal?"

"Um. . ." Summer thought for a moment, "Leaves. Grass. Nectar, flowers."

"No." Trei said quickly, "Vegetables, sure. Potatoes are awesome. Some leafy stuff like lettuce is fine. . . I guess we make tea out of some flowers. But we can't eat most, they're. . . Poisonous."

Summer smiled slowly as if understanding something for the first time, "Omnivore. Humans proliferated so quickly on your world, because you were omnivores. Most things can be made into food, which meant starving was harder. That's. . . Amazing. Your gut must be something serious."

Trei laughed, "My gut? I can't imagine digesting nectar. The Fae must be pretty amazing too."

Summer held a hand to her mouth as she burst out laughing, "That's what most Fae will tell you."

The ghoul grinned, "So humility isn't very popular then?"

"No. We're all arrogant. So if you meet a really arrogant Fae. . . Well, it doesn't matter what you say or do. They'll think everything good happened because of them, and everything bad because of you. Absolutely impossible to make them admit fault."

Trei smiled, "I think I've met one or two humans like that too."

The girl sighed, "Well. I guess it's sundown soon, so we should get you moving."

Trei frowned, "I still feel weak. I haven't got the hang of things yet."

She shrugged and held a hand over his face, "Nothing a little dust can't fix."

He coughed as she sprinkled it over him, and he rolled over, hacking. He paused in surprise, and slowly pushed himself upright, "I feel. . . Light."

Summer held out her hand, "So, let's take a walk."

---

## Alphege

Challenge, he'd said. If the taint on the tree truly was a challenge issued by Tyr, then she had failed it. She slammed the spear into the grown and wiped her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand.

Whatever magic was infecting Yggdrasil was beyond her understanding. That any magic could overcome the tree was surprising in itself to her. It was the wellspring from which all elves fed. It was the source of their life, and magic.

Created by the Fate, F'rir, their goddess. It didn't make sense that something created to be eternal could be dying, and yet it was.

The taint was already spreading, burning through her race.

She was among the first to fall sick, her connection to the wellspring being stronger than most. She glared at the black lines tracing across the backs of her hands. It wasn't like anything that occurred in nature. They twisted and turned with sharp corners, spreading out across her skin erratically, seeking nothing obvious, no veins or muscles. Just a slowly spreading even and mathematically sound form.

This was a spellvirus of some kind. A kind she didn't understand at all. It was eating away at her, killing her. Yggdrasil was the source of the infection, but she hadn't been able to identify the vector used to spread from the tree to her or anyone else.

The symptoms were obvious, including the strange pattern. Fever, loss of muscle control, dehydration, dizziness, fatigue. She winced, holding her mouth. Add nausea to the growing list. She could tell the end result already. Death. First the weak, the young and old would die. Shortly followed by the healthy. This was a complete breakdown of the natural immune responses that they possessed.

She had knowledge in Gaian magic, but the spellvirus didn't act like it was made with living magic. It acted slowly, predictably. It had to be mathematical in nature, somehow. If you knew the formula, then disabling the virus would be easy. Reverse engineering the formula was fruitless, thus far, and by her own estimates she only had a day or so left to live. Time to her losing capacity to function, and able to continue trying to protect her world, was much less. A few hours, probably, before she started experiencing hallucinations.

She didn't have a choice. She needed help, and no elf was as equipped as herself to provide it.

She did know an expert in spellviruses. A witch who had killed thousands using her own creations. The woman was downright vile, and had amassed power that no mortal before her had. However, she was creative. She was an expert in almost all magic, and a prodigy in almost half of them. She had forced elfkind to sign a treaty of non-aggression once. Her people had been more than happy to. They weren't interested in the outside world. They wanted to be left alone. When a mortal had turned up and killed half their forest in a single moment, the treaty wasn't seen as an arduous or abhorrent task.

She didn't particularly want to be in this witch's debt.

She knew her own worth. She was a soldier, the Guardian of Alfheimr. She would be able to unleash a devastating attack on the mortal's enemies. Even in her current weakened state, where death was around the corner, she would be able to inflict immense casualties on most opponents. Goblin or ork invasions weren't a serious threat yet. Mortals even less so... Apart from that one witch. The best and worst humanity had to offer.

She was running out of time. Doing nothing but wasting time. She knew what needed to be done. She just needed to have the courage to do what was necessary. To offer what was necessary. It was her duty, as Guardian.

She knelt beside the spear, and touched her hands together, and then bowed and touched her head to the soil.

---

## Azrael

He could see most of Ozandius from the balcony. The bustling port town below, the farms beyond the walls, and the lights of the distant villages stretching into the hills. These were his people, by birth and by oath.

“Sir Azrael.” A soldier saluted behind him and the paladin turned slowly, his gaze lingering on his nearby shield.

“Speak.”

The soldier snapped a fist to his chest, “King Iza requests your presence.”

The paladin smiled grimly, “My father rarely merely requests my presence. He demands, whilst cussing and threatening. What was his mood?”

The soldier was caught off-guard and nervously stammered, “He... The king... Was quiet. M’lord.”

Well, that was bad.

Azrael nodded tiredly and picked up a heavy chain necklace from nearby, hissing silently as it burned his neck. It was the talisman of his goddess and opened the doorway to keep him linked to her. It allowed him to feel her light, and to use it in the same way a mage might use magic, at the cost of his own life.

Every usage reduced his lifespan, bringing him closer to the day he would join the goddess in paradise, where he would be rewarded according to the actions he took for her in his lifetime. It was different than magic. If the goddess disagreed with the action he was attempting, then he would receive no power, being left as only a man. This was the weapon the goddess gave him as a means to destroy magic users, not as a tool to be used for the petty needs of state.

His father was not very understanding of that.

He walked the halls slowly, and calmly. Contemplating the situation. If his father was keeping himself in check, then there was only one obvious course of action he was about to take. It was one that Azrael was not certain he could assist with. He served the goddess, not Ozandius. If his father wished to wage a war, to bring the horrors of death, destitution, plague and tyranny to a new land, then his father could do it by his own might. The goddess was not interested in those concerns. She dealt with the soul, without concern for the mortal shell that might contain it.

He paused at the end of the red carpet leading to the golden throne, a throne built from casts of the skulls of the men his father had slain to gain the power he had today. Elfen, Faen, Ork, Goblin and even Human skulls were crammed together, arranging a surface that looked neither comfortable, nor practical. Nothing but a show of force and intimidation from the heir of Hero. Each skull had a story connected to it, a story that Azrael knew. A life taken. A life destroyed. He doubted his father even knew one of the lives he had taken. That wasn’t the point. This wasn’t a memorial. It was a threat. A threat the man had both the willingness and ability to carry out.

“Boy.”

He turned, looking to the side of his room where his father was arranging a map, and he walked over slowly, “My king.”

The man grunted acknowledgement, and tapped the map, “It is finally time. You will lead my army. You will also present yourself as the envoy, to demand surrender. We will wipe them from the face of this world.”

Azrael ground his teeth angrily as he approached. What genocide was the king planning this time?

He looked at the map slowly, and then frowned, "You seem to have thought this through, my king."

"The Temple has aided in the planning of this attack." The king shrugged, "Our biggest problem will be the queen, and her witchery. You are the only one who might turn that advantage aside."

Azrael sighed. Calis. A city devoted to magic. Created by the mage Vastras, nearly five hundred years before. She still ruled there, albeit in the shadows. She was quiet, and her longevity wasn't without cost, a cost that she would be forced to pay, eventually.

Vastras wasn't an evil person, even if she had amassed magical power that few could begin to comprehend. She had been his mentor when he was a child, his lover when he came of age. She didn't age. She simply watched all around her die, or betray her and then she became the one who killed them.

Her purpose wasn't so far afield as his own. He had left her teachings behind when he joined the temple and began to serve the goddess in destroying magic, but Vastras sought to bring balance to the world.

She killed rogue mages as quickly and easily as she killed rising dictators. She had taught him of the evils of magic, so that he might know how to undo them by their own power. He certainly thought she was mistaken, that her path would lead to nothing but corruption, but he couldn't hate her for her actions...

He wasn't entirely certain the goddess would grant him the right to kill her. Vastras was a tool that helped maintain balance amongst all celestials. She wasn't something to be cast aside and destroyed as easily as his father seemed to wish.

"I am not certain I hold the advantage over my old teacher." Azrael replied politically.

King Iza sneered, "You have the goddess, paladin. What is one old hag? You have your orders. Carry them out."

The paladin bowed, "I will approach the goddess."

He turned and left, wondering if his father would attack him, or simply order another assassination attempt.

---

## Summer

As his calloused hand touched hers light exploded behind her eyes. Hundreds of thousands of images swarmed in front of her, around her. Fleeting images of her past, and more. Scenes she couldn't remember. Her holding his hand as they walked through the Valley of Hu. Her floating in the air, screaming as her wings burned. Her looking up at his silhouette as the sun exploded. And then... An image of her, ageing and weak in a chair, watching a small Fae in front of her. A child, learning how to fly for the first time... But not a child she recognised.

All Fae lived forever, or until their soul was broken. Death meant reincarnation, and a slow several hundred year process of remembering the past through discipline and magic. There had never been a new Fae. Ever. All of them were brought into existence at the same time, when Summer's mother had created them.

Summer felt the world spinning, and heard his voice nearby, calling her name, as she fell.

It was too much.

She collapsed as the light blinded her, falling into the light. It swarmed around her, screaming and whispering. The memories of her people, from the beginning to the end.

Trei standing there, smiling grimly. A warrior's stance. It wasn't the body he had now. There were no burns, no rotting flesh. He wasn't half alive. He was talking to her, but she couldn't make out the words. He stepped towards her, arms wrapping around her.

Summer flushed red as he kissed her.

She stumbled forward. He was gone. A memory. A vision. A fragment of what could be. Would he really just walk up to her and kiss her one day?

"Mama?"

Summer felt a chill crawl down her spine and turned slowly, looking at a small yellow-haired Faeling. The child grinned at her, "Mama!"

Summer crouched slowly, not recognising the girl. It wasn't possible. There had been no new Fae since the original sacrifice. Since her race had been created. How could she not know who this was? Was this a Faeling she would nurse? Is that why they liked her?

The Faeling stamped her foot. "Dad's gonna be mad."

Summer frowned, "Why's that?"

"Because you need to wake up."

Before Summer could react the child grabbed the sides of her head, and screamed. A pain ripped through Summer and the light swarmed around her before vanishing. She groaned, holding herself in the darkness.

---



## Janus

Janus paced in his darkened drinks room. His whisky lay on the mantelpiece over the dying fire, untouched. He was too anxious to allow himself to become intoxicated, to allow himself to relax. Too many threads that he'd laid over the process of a dozen lifetimes were coming to completion. A single misstep now might prove fatal, and a colossal waste of time.

"M'lord." A voice spoke as one of the shadows detached itself from the rest, a black-haired Fae emerging into the fading light. His wings were dull, absent the dust that allowed them to sparkle.

Janus paused, looking at the spy, "Speak, Rendi."

"The Queen has collapsed." The man responded flatly, "She touched the ghoul, and experienced a vision."

Janus sighed heavily. There was no way to know what the Queen had seen. No magic could pry it from her mind, or at least not without killing her, and eliminating her in that manner would guarantee his failure. She was too well-liked by the people. His annexation of her lands, though necessary, had nearly caused all his plans to fall apart and be for nought.

"Anything else?"

The spy smiled, "The two are alone. The servants have been sent away."

Janus considered it. He could make a case for infidelity. That the queen wasn't observing the Right correctly. Yet whilst that would allow him to expel her from the Council, it wouldn't satisfy the judicial cravings of the rest of the Council, and some would stand against him. War might erupt, and though he could certainly win such an eventuality, it would taint his rule for the rest of eternity. He would lose future subjects.

"Continue to watch." He said, dismissing the man, and resumed his pacing. So, the queen's claim of the Right hadn't been a bluff. She'd laid bait for him to demand an examination. He was glad he hadn't taken it. That would have closed the door to fabricating a lie later on, when the queen's position became more vulnerable than it was now.

This ghoul... He needed to know more of the creature if he were to understand how to manipulate it, and break it. To cause it to break a law, and earn a death sentence without hesitation. He crooked a finger to a man he knew was waiting patiently in the darkness.

The assassin emerged, his eyes blinded by a myriad of scars across his face. This was the greatest warrior the Fae realm had to offer, and one of the greatest infiltrators that served Janus. The man had fought Hero personally, and had stalked and assassinated hundreds of humans in their own world. Any time a mage got close to creating a portal, this was who Janus had sent to eliminate them.

"Find out about this mortal."

The shadow vanished silently.

---

## Summer

Summer breathed in deeply, sighing as she felt the light pass over her face. The light struck her skin, breaking apart as it struck the tiny crystals within it, forming the dust that covered her. Rejuvenated her.

She winced as she felt the skin on the back of her head shifting, stitching itself back together again. She opened her eyes, looking at the wooden roof slowly, and sat up. She touched her head gently, feeling the newly-formed skin.

“You’re awake.” A worried voice stated.

Summer smiled weakly as the memories came back with an urgent flood. “Sorry. I guess I was hungry myself... What time is it?”

“Early morning. The sun has just crested the mountains.” His vague answer came back.

Summer rolled her eyes and flicked a speck of dust into the air, watching as it expanded, “The eighth hour. Not quite early.”

She stood up, stretching as she unfurled her wings, touching the walls of her bedroom, and then she heard a thump. She looked over and saw the ghoul on the ground covering his eyes.

Summer glanced down at herself, and then laughed, “Does your kind not sleep naked?”

“No!” He said in embarrassment, “Also, how? I put you to bed with clothes on!”

She turned to the swirl of clothes and blankets on the bed that had formed her cocoon, “I guess I wriggled out of them. Are all humans so modest?”

“Most.” She heard him say bitterly and she sighed, “Fine. I’ll get dressed. Why don’t you try and start a fire, so we can cook you something?”

The human shuffled nervously out of the room, trying not to look at her. Summer felt herself blushing, he really was a very sweet-natured soul. Her own modesty would probably return soon, but the early morning was a bit different for most Fae, as they emerged from their hibernation. She felt a pang of guilt - she’d passed out before she could help him find something to eat. He’d waited all night, on an empty stomach, and since the dust would have worn off, a very weak body.

She turned and opened her wardrobe, eyeing the dresses that had been laid out with distrust. She wasn’t acting as Queen today. That had already been arranged. Instead she was supposed to be taking time to get to know the man she was going to marry.

Summer sighed and sank down on the ground, wrapping her wings around herself. Marriage. It was rare amongst Fae now, since there was so little need for most to marry. The soulmates had long since found each other, and those without had little desire for binding themselves to another soul for eternity. Copulation still happened, but it was never expected to be a long term thing. It wasn’t like any of them could have children.

Marriage was almost solely a political thing... But now... Now she was facing it. Both for politics and... Something else. She wasn’t sure what she felt. Every time she touched him she saw visions of the past and the future. The universe had already decided that their souls would be tangled. Yet, the future she saw with him was one of violence and destruction. Horrifying things... And beautiful, impossible things that she’d never dared to hope for.

He was as dangerous as he was tempting. A kind soul.

Summer wiped a tear from her cheek angrily. She didn’t want to feel like this. She didn’t like

feeling confused. She didn't like the way that his voice made her heart skip a beat. He had power over her, a power she'd never seen anyone ever employ. It was something more dangerous than magic... He had been human. He would hurt her, sooner or later. That was inevitable.

Yet... Here she was, trying to pretend she wasn't disappointed with the clothes in her wardrobe, as if she hadn't been looking for something to try and impress him.

---

## Trei

Trei cursed and yanked his hand back as the flames spread to it. It didn't hurt, which was surprising. But he figured that burning yourself was bad, no matter which world you were in, or what species you were.

He looked at his hand and sighed. It was burned. Again. The skin look really dead at this point.

"Oh. Did you hurt yourself?" He heard her musical voice, and he turned, "Yeah, I was -"

His voice cut off with a choked sound as he saw the Fae. She was wearing a simple white dress, plain and smooth. It wasn't something that most would find striking. Yet, as it hung over her it gave way to something from another world. She was beautiful beyond compare. Her lithe figure highlighted by the way the silk clung to her, the strength in her arms just barely showing, and her cool blue eyes staring out like endless lakes that a traveller could drown in.

She frowned, "Are you okay, Trei? Did you swallow your tongue?"

He shook his head wordlessly, internally kicking himself to say something. Anything.

She smiled sheepishly and walked passed him, stoking the fire, before turning, "Well. Time to get my carnivore something to eat."

Trei tried to smile but got the distinct impression that half the muscles in his face were paralysed. "What about you?"

"The garden has enough." She grinned and turned, walking out the door, "Come along, idiot."

The ghoul stumbled after her, emerging into the light slowly. He hadn't seen it yesterday, but it was an amazing garden. The well was the centrepiece, but all around were trees of every kind, wrapped in vines with flowers that shone brightly with colours he couldn't even recognise.

Summer picked a pink petal off a nearby flower and stuck it in her mouth. He shivered involuntarily. She waved a hand around, "There's a few things you could chase down. Birds are probably too quick for you nowadays, but why don't you run something out of the bushes. I'll catch it."

Trei stumbled towards the bushes, still feeling like he was controlling his body like an amateur puppeteer, but something shot out of the undergrowth immediately. A white ball of rage flew at his face, and then as he fell, it shot overhead.

He heard giggling as he rolled over and saw Summer standing there, laughing at him as a small white rabbit was frozen in the air. Trei moved clumsily upright, and smiled at her sheepishly. "Well, I never thought I'd see a rabbit take out a humanoid."

Trei shrugged, too embarrassed to come up with a witty line.

---

## Yio

She glared at her pink-haired sister, and put a platter of food on the table between them. There was a tense moment, as they eyed each other off, fingers flexing.

Yio darted, grabbing her chopsticks and went to grab something and her eyes went wide with disappointment.

F'rir smiled at her victoriously, "Too slow."

Yio crossed her arms, pouting. "I went to all the trouble of luring a master chef here from the mortal world, and you always go and eat everything he makes. It isn't easy getting all the ingredients he wants to exist here."

F'rir rolled her eyes, revealing a glamour spell and the intact platter, "You are so easy to tease, Yio."

Yio picked up one of the rice balls and delicately put it in her mouth. Exploring the sweet explosion of flavours as it melted.

The older sister sighed, looking at her own, "You never share. What are you going to try and tempt me to do?"

Yio winced, "It's... This situation in the Evening Realms. The mortal."

"Who has you twisted six ways to Sunday around his dead little finger." F'rir growled, "You cannot go anywhere near him. You don't have fantastic self control at the best of times, little one. If you got too close, you'd try and jump him. And the worlds really don't need the birth of a new celestial, let alone one with a mortal heritage."

Yio flushed red, picturing the man without a top on. She really didn't need that image jammed into her head. She knew she wanted to jump him. Didn't mean it was going to happen. There were other things, more important things than the sound of his voice saying her name. Yio's face hit her palm, and she tried to breathe. "I have... Other concerns."

F'rir nodded as she picked up an unhealthily thick slice of fish, "Agreed. But I don't see how we can do anything about it."

Yio buried a squeal as she tasted the fried chicken, and then looked at her sister, "We can't do nothing. The balance is already disturbed. If he continues as he is, then everything will become... Unwound."

F'rir winced, "Sure. However, did you notice whose fate he got tangled with first?"

"Summer." Yio pouted.

Her sister grinned at her, "Now, now. Jealousy is not becoming of a goddess, and you are more than that."

Yio stuck out her tongue at her, and picked up a blade of grass and twirled it, "The treaty."

"Yes." F'rir cautioned, "So you are not getting involved. You're going to block yourself from checking in on him. If you don't, I might just let Summer know she has competition. I'm sure she'd love to know that a Fate is interested in her boyfriend, too."

Yio coughed nervously, "Yeah. That would go down well."

---

## Summer

Summer savoured the petal as her fangs tore into it, whilst across from her Trei attempted to appear dignified whilst using a blade to carve up flesh. It took a considerable amount of willpower not to simply laugh at him. Apparently, this was normal for humans. He needed some normal in his life now. He wasn't human anymore.

She held up a green leaf, her face falling, she wanted normal. She was so tired of the political games, of people waiting for her to make a mistake, just to take their own pound of flesh. Her people suffered more than most. For the sake of her blood.

"Summer?"

She smiled weakly, and then turned to Trei, "There's someone coming this afternoon."

He frowned, "Politicians? The people forcing us to marry?"

The bitterness in his voice scorched her. That it hurt also hurt. She didn't want to marry a dead thing... Except... She did. She wanted him. All for her own. And that absolutely terrified her. How could the remains of a mortal have such control of her?

"No." She smiled weakly, "A tailor. Or rather, a tailor and his group of assistants. He'll be... A jerk. He is the foremost tailor in all the Fae Realms. He can dictate his own terms. He... Likes a challenge. You're not Fae, so you'll be a challenge. He'll enjoy the problem, and won't care about your opinion."

Trei frowned, thinking, "A suit. You said the wedding would be... Big. I'm guessing that means, traditional... What does a traditional Fae ceremony look like? ... For humans, I'd be in a black suit, white shirt. Expensive tie. You'd be in a white dress. We'd marry in a church, dedicating our lives to one of the gods."

Summer screwed up her face, failing to hide her horror. "Dedicated? Like a lifelong sacrifice to those demiurges? Most have little or nothing to do with any of us."

Trei shrugged, "Humanity... We're superstitious. Most of us feel a... Debt. We wouldn't exist without the gods."

Summer's face changed to one of understanding, "Oh. That makes sense. Sorry... The Fae weren't created by the gods. We have no allegiance to them."

Trei's eyes widened, "What? If you weren't created by the gods... How?"

Summer sighed, "It's... Difficult to explain. I think... I should start with why we call humans mortal. You live, and then you die, and then... Some souls are collected by your gods. And that is all, in your fleeting lifespan. The Fae aren't like that. We live hundreds of years, and then we do die... And are reborn. It takes some time to remember who we are, but we continue our lives in this cycle. Our souls are... Eternal."

Trei nodded slowly, "That's... Different."

"There was a first Fae, once. Her name was Sumner. She... Wasn't created. She existed, like the gods, before the gods invented time. Before the realms were created. She made us. All of us. Every Fae is a daughter or son of Sumner, and brother or sister of each other. We're not similar in the same terms of humanity and their families... We were all created, uniquely... And we can't have children of our own. That was lost with Sumner's death." Summer stopped, her voice choking. She hadn't meant to say so much.

Trei winced, "Your mother."

She nodded weakly, nibbling on her lunch slowly.

Trei sighed heavily, "Marriage must be rare. You don't have the family bonds that we expect."

"Yes."

He shrugged, "So... What's this tailor going to make me wear?"

She appreciated it. He dropped the subject when it became apparent it hurt her. There was kindness to his soul. A kindness that she found herself craving, wanting it to shield her, allow her to lean on it, to let the weight of her world fall off her shoulders. This was a weakness she couldn't afford.

"I'm not sure." Summer smiled slowly, "There's never been a non-Fae groom before. Well, groom is the human term, isn't it?"

Trei nodded slowly, "Yeah. Bride and groom. What do the Fae call them?"

"Bride." She replied and shrugged, "We're both brides. We give ourselves to each other, entirely, completely and without reservation. Which isn't at all true, but it's what we say."

Trei smiled briefly at that, "Sounds about right. You avoided the question. What would a male bride wear, normally?"

"Nothing." Summer said quickly, sighing, "We wouldn't normally wear anything. We'd wear paint on our wings, and magical symbols on our flesh... But no clothes. We bear ourselves to each other, in the presence of those we trust. A symbolic gesture, that our lives are dedicated to each other. We're naked at birth, and marriage is a kind of... Rebirth."

Trei frowned, "Do marriages last beyond death, what with... Coming back?"

"Yes and no." Summer shrugged, "Most don't. Sometimes, when you've recovered your memories, you can seek out your partner again, and rekindle the romance... But it's always different. Every lifetime is different, for all of us. Most of the time... It's better if you don't. Your partner might be nearing the end of their life, and now you're at the beginning of a new one. You become... Childish and immature, whilst they're disenfranchised with the world. It doesn't tend to be a good match for all of us."

"That sounds... Painful." Trei said sadly, "I think I'm beginning to see why so few of you get married."

Summer smiled sadly, "Yeah."

"... Have you ever married?" Trei asked, and she looked up startled, staring at his eyes, "Oh. Well... No."

He cocked his head, "Really? Aren't you... Haven't you lived a lot of lives? Hundreds of years?"

"Thousands." Summer smiled, feeling her stomach flutter nervously, "I... I haven't told you everything. I... Don't know how to. I still need... Time... But... Marrying me is different than most. It's part of why our wedding will be so big. It'll change all the realms."

Trei sighed heavily and nodded, "I'm... Picking up some of it, Summer. This house... The garden... You're not an ordinary Fae, are you? You're someone... Important. I'm sorry. I guess the politicians are pushing you because of me... And because they know you."

She smiled sadly and nodded. She still didn't know how to tell him.

---



## Trei

The tailor was a tall Fae. His head nearly struck the ceiling as he paced around Trei, sniffing and gagging. He poked, and prodded. The man produced instruments, some sharp, and pushed them against him, measuring.

At length the Fae leaned down, face to face, “I am convinced. You’re a dead corpse of an infection that has spread throughout the mortal realm.”

Trei looked up at the man. He’d seen enough faces like this. People who looked down on him, just because of who he was. Because he was unremarkable. Unskilled. He’d tolerated it his entire life, learned to live with their burning hatred and weakness.

“So you have a challenge, then.” Trei said, mouth curling into a smile.

The tailor pulled back in revulsion, “Please, spare me the breath of a dead man.”

The man paced some more, but Trei could tell he’d piqued the man’s interest. Challenged him to turn something he reviled and hated into something beautiful, worthy of being admired.

“I am uncertain, corpse, if I can do anything for you. The wedding is traditional. There can be no question on that front. Yet, your flesh is burned, and some of it is rotting. How the Council expects to bind the Lady to a form like you. . . It offends me.” The Fae sniffed, and immediately regretted it.

“Why?” Trei shrugged, and the Fae started, staring at him, “I beg your pardon?”

He smiled, “Well, tradition suits our fair lady, true enough. . . But she has chosen to bind herself to a mortal. As I understand it, there is no precedent for this.”

The tailor sighed, “Not. . . Entirely true, little ghoul. Others have in the past. Their souls were extinguished for committing such an act.”

Trei felt a wave of nausea at the thought. The death sentence. So now. . . All the Fae would hate him. For tainting their fair lady. This marriage might be forced on them, but it would undermine Summer in the eyes of. . . Everyone.

The tailor shrugged, “You are correct though, in a way. The marriage is. . . Different. The ceremony will be public and attended by all. We won’t be hiding you away. . . No. Your differences make you unique. . . I am uncertain how to begin. If I accentuate your humanity, I risk causing a riot. If I pretend you’re Fae, you may well be murdered before you can take your vow to the Lady, and that places her at risk. If I show your death. . . Well, that is simply poor taste.”

Trei shrugged, sitting down slowly in a chair, “You’re the second Fae I’ve ever met, sir. I don’t know your people, or culture. All I know is Summer’s kindness.”

The Fae’s eyes bulged, “I. . . I understand the Lady may accept that behaviour from you, sir. . . But for my own sensibilities, will you please not refer to the Lady by her name.”

Trei felt his stomach twist into knots. Nobility. She wasn’t just nobility. She was above everyone, wasn’t she? Some sort of aristocracy. People too afraid to speak her name. And here he was. . . Soiling her name. Turning the people against her.

“Sorry.” Trei said sadly, looking down, “I never meant for any of this to happen.”

The tailor paused, “Sir?”

“I was dead.” Trei shrugged, “Gone. Tossed into the common pit to burn and be forgotten.”

The tailor shuffled his feet uncomfortably, “You feel guilt. Did you not ask to bind the Lady’s soul?”

“No.” Trei replied, “The Council demanded it.”

The tailor dropped onto one knee, bowing his head, “I have misjudged you, sir. There is only one reason they would accept you, and there is only one reason they would place this weight upon the Lady. You are not at fault, mortal.”

Trei frowned, “The Lady hasn’t told me why. I don’t think she wants me to know.”

The tailor smiled sadly, “It is certainly not my place to tell you. I think. . . I would find it difficult to tell you, were I in the place of the Lady, as ridiculous as it is to suppose the mind of such a great woman. I will do my best, to show you as something more. Something the people should respect.”

The man stood, looking at Trei with consideration, “The traditional is out. So is the human costume. No. . . I think I have something. Have you ever worn a uniform?”

Trei shrugged, “I was a blacksmith’s apprentice. The only uniform I’ve had is an apron.”

“It takes practice, to wear a uniform correctly.” The tailor mused, “I’ll have a tutor instruct you, with some. . . Prototypes. It will take me time and several attempts to rework the traditional soldier’s uniform of the Fae to better suit you. It will present you as our Lady’s servant and protector. That may be suitable for the common folk.”

Trei blinked in surprise, “That sounds. . . Good. When. . . The normal vow a human gives to his bride. . . We swear to protect them for the rest of their days.”

The tailor smiled, “Yes. That is a theme I would posit you should present to our Lady. It may work quite well.”

---

## Rendi

He stood silently behind the trapped figure in the dark room. His master was standing in front of him, just barely illuminated by the dust on his wings. The man was silent, looking away from the figure, testing him with the dangers of silence.

Few tortures could exceed those that the mind can create for itself. Eventually you may need to bring reality home, to break the mind and gain access to the information you desire, but it is always best not to leave a mindless and broken creature when instead you can turn something into an asset.

Janus yawned tiredly, "I'm waiting."

The terrified man burst into a torrent of words, "For what? What have I done to possibly offend you, Arbiter? I'm a tailor! I have no part in politics or war. I have never spoken of anything I have seen or heard! I am no threat to you, and I have no desire to ever be. How have I harmed you? What have I done that requires a response of this magnitude?"

"Punish him." Janus replied quietly, casually.

Rendi sighed and without warning tore one of the Fae's wings off. The man screamed, and continued screaming. Tears streaming down his face. Rendi tossed the now limp wing in front, where the man could see it by the subtle sparkle of the dust. Blood poured openly from the wound, and Rendi touched the man's back gently. He screamed, arching, as the flames cauterised the wound.

Janus yawned again, as the tailor leaned forward, breathing heavily. "I'm waiting."

The tailor went to speak but fell forward, held back only by his bonds to the chair, throwing up violently. His master made a sound of irritation, "I leave him to you, then."

Rendi moved in front of the figure and crouched. All the man could see were his eyes. His grey eyes staring into the man's soul, silently.

"I don't know what you want me to say!" The tailor begged, tears streaming down his face.

It was the point. Anything coerced couldn't be trusted. The tailor would tell them what they wanted to know, eventually. He would tell Rendi everything, from start to finish. Everything he knew, from every life. Every secret he had ever heard. Every rumour he had ever suspected. The man would tell Rendi everything that he was.

---

## Summer

Summer sighed heavily, looking at the teacup, and the peppermint leaves lying on the saucer. Usually she'd find them tempting, and struggle not to down them in a manner that didn't belong in a dignified person. Not today, today the tea was untouched and she hadn't bitten a single leaf.

The woman across from her looked around, "Your garden flourishes. I've always been jealous of how easy you make it look, Summer."

She smiled sadly, looking up at the silver-haired woman. She was dressed in an elegant black dress that sparkled in the sunlight, and a silver bracelet around one wrist. The only Fae who dared to wear the poisonous metal.

The woman sighed, "You sent everyone away, Summer. I'm trying to compliment you. I'm worried."

"So am I." She replied, "I'm terrified. Janus is waiting for a mistake. I may have already made it. I don't think I can get out of this one unscathed."

The silver-haired woman nodded slowly, "I... I have visions about this mortal, sister."

"Luna?" She asked, and the woman shrugged, "I know. I'm not much of a prophet. My prophecies and visions are of every future, not the one that fate has chosen. But... When I look at the future... The ones where the mortal is... It terrifies me."

Summer turned, "I see them, whenever I touch him... They're... Filled with things that don't make any sense."

"A child." Luna said slowly, "I see a child. A newborn Fae. The first since we were created... But... I also see war. Destruction. In so many of these futures, I see your death. My death. The destruction and genocide of all Fae."

Summer swallowed nervously, "Yes."

Luna shivered, "What is it about this mortal that he distorts every timeline? Wasn't your resurrection of him just an accident?"

"I thought it was." Summer shrugged, "But... I can't..."

Luna smiled at her sister slowly, "You imprinted on him. Didn't you?"

Summer felt her cheeks get hot and looked down at her tea in embarrassment. Imprinting wasn't the same as love. It was more than that. There was only a half dozen cases in the entirety of Faen history. It was the permanent binding of two souls. Once imprinted, a person would never be whole without the other, ever again. For the entirety of their immortal lives... How do you explain to a toddler why they feel depressed and empty, waiting for the rebirth of the one to whom they now belonged?

Imprinting was a taboo. Not explicitly forbidden, but looked down upon because of the social implications and the long-term impossibility.

And now... She'd gone and imprinted on a soul that was only fleetingly alive. Soon enough he'd lose his grip on his body, and his soul would be claimed by a god. He'd be gone, forever... And she would live without him... Forever.

"I hate myself." Summer whispered.

Luna grabbed her hand, squeezing it tightly, "Don't. You couldn't control this. You're not to blame... And frankly, I don't know if it is a bad thing. The Fae have been so tense for so long.

Janus has been amassing power for three centuries. More and more people feel like they can't fight him. Maybe it's time we change things. Maybe that change begins with hope. You're our hope. The hope... For a child... You and I spent seven lifetimes searching for Sumner's spell, trying to create a new generation of Fae, and we failed. We found the spell, and found that it can't be repeated... But maybe Sumner gave us another way forward. Maybe the mortal is our future."

Summer wished she could believe her.

---

## Astrian

The Fae stretched, relaxing in the hammock. It was unusual that she'd have as much free time as this. Time enough to relax, and indulge in sleeping so late. She rarely had a chance to get up after the sun had risen.

She reached down out of the warmth of her hammock and into the cold breeze, grabbing the book quickly before darting her hand back inside. She sighed and pulled the hammock closed atop her. It was getting too cold out there.

She looked at the book curiously. Most of the other Fae didn't understand why she would read, at all. Most of history was preserved in memories, copied from one to another. Dreamworlds created and controlled by magic were far more immersive than a book could ever threaten to be.

Yet, Astrian enjoyed the simplicity of it. It didn't take her any effort. No magic. It also helped with the other problem. The roar of Faen voices pouring through her skull like a hurricane. Her powers were limited, and not especially spectacular compared to the woman she served, but when it came to mental magics, she was a savant.

She couldn't block out the voices. She didn't know how. She didn't have the skill for that. All she could do was narrow her focus, like picking out one voice in a crowded room. She could every voice in the realm. The thoughts and swaying emotions of her extremely turbulent people. A Fae would never hide from their emotions, and they certainly wouldn't stop themselves from speaking their minds, but their minds were engulfed with their feelings, hopes and desires.

Astrian rubbed her temple and thumbed open the book to the leaf marking the page, and began to reacquaint herself with the tired and quiet world the writer had imagined. It was a dull place. Halfway through the tale and nothing at all had happened. The writer had established his characters, and they played off against each other quietly, creating humour and mirth, without conflict or terror.

She snuggled into her blanket, smiling to herself quietly.

"Wake up, princess!"

Astrian groaned, grabbing her head as the voices came flooding back, and opened the hammock slowly, glaring at the silver-haired figure standing over her. "What do you want? It's my first day off in three hundred years."

The silver-haired demon cocked her hip, planting her hand on it, "Oh come off it, Astrian. Don't try and hardball me. We both know Summer is nuts. None of this is going to end well if she tries to do it all on her own. Janus will just get the excuse he needs to take the crown."

Astrian rolled her eyes, turning back to her book, "Fix it yourself."

"Do you want me to pull rank on you, little Faeling?"

Astrian closed the book, and swung her legs over the edge of the hammock, standing and curtsying, "Apologies, princess."

The woman winced, "Sorry."

"I am here to serve, as always." Astrian replied with another curtsy, "I have served Lady Summer all my life. Do you believe this ghoulish poses a threat to her safety?"

"No." She replied with frustration.

"To her happiness?"

“Again, no.”

Astrian shrugged, “Then by what right do I, simple servant than I am, have to interfere in the affairs of my mistress? Lady Luna?”

Luna shrugged, “I just don’t want this all to go to crap. Summer just talked to me. She’s worried, and I am as well.”

Astrian paused, blinking at the flickering of images. “What was that? Lady Luna. You have seen the creature. What was it?”

Luna smiled, “Never could hide my thoughts from you. A vision. Well, several. Every night for the last three months. The ghoul comes, Summer falls for him. War breaks out. Summer, fighting, wings burning. . . A Fae child I don’t recognise. I see both of us, I see Janus, and his assassins. I see Hero, and Tyr. I see an elf, and a human mortal. I don’t. . . There is no flow to this, Lady Astrian. I’m no prophet. Just a jumbled mess.”

Astrian smiled and held out her hand, “Let me see, please, Lady Luna. Allow me to see what you see.”

The world swarmed away from her in a brilliant splash of colour.

Astrian watched, curiously as an elf stood in front of her, brandishing a spear made from their eternal tree. The elf was kneeling beside the ghoul. He didn’t appear to be as she knew he should be. As if he had learned to heal his body, a magical trait that few could learn to master.

The elf smiled at him, “Tragedy is one of the lasting themes of the history of Elfkind. We are accustomed to pain, and loss. I have buried three husbands, and ten grandchildren, mortal. I have known love, triumph, and death. That is the way of our people. We do not have the taboos that Fae have against our mingling with your kind. . . But the heartbreak is inevitable. We know that you will die. It is nice, for a time. But it cannot last. We know it, as we always have.”

The man winced, “I’m sorry.”

Lady Summer appeared in the centre of her vision, blushing and looking away, “I’m sorry, okay?”

Astrian turned, looking at the mortal lying on the ground of the Lady’s house, and up at her, “They’re making you marry me? That. . . Doesn’t make sense to me. It’s not like I got you pregnant.”

“Geeze!” Summer exploded, launching to her feet and starting to pace, “Look, can’t you just be happy you’re alive? I’m the one who has to marry an undead ghoul who can’t even walk!”

“Oh shoot. Sorry, Astrian.” The man said.

She spun, staring at him in shock, and then relaxed. He was speaking to another version of her. Astrian winced. Despite being silent, this other version of herself. . . The aura was unmistakable. She was weeping inside. What could a mortal have said that could so move her? She cared little for their kind.

“Astrian. It’s okay. You don’t need to hide those feelings. We’re all in this together.”

She turned, looking at her ladyship. What had Lady Summer just said? That didn’t. . . Make any sense. What feelings? What could Astrian possibly feel that she would feel ashamed of hiding it from an undead beast?

The ghoul in front of her burst out, “I know. I’m sorry, Luna. I’m sorry I exist.”

Astrian spun to look at Luna, the vision was already changing, accelerating. Trying to show her the future that was coming. The future that would be. That must be.

The elf slapped Lady Luna, hard. Luna hit the ground on her knees as her forehead hit the ground with a solid and rather painful thwack. She grabbed her head with both hands and kicked rapidly, waiting for the pain to subside. The Fae breathed heavily, "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I fucking killed everyone of you stupid little ageless ur'kan. I'm sorry that none of you gave me an ashen choice!"

"Yes." Lady Luna nodded, "Claven here, is red magic. The elf is... Elfin magic. A mix of blue and green."

Astrian turned, looking at Madam Claven sitting on the couch, surprised. She was a minor dignitary. A historian who had never amounted to much. She wasn't aware that any of them had a relationship strong enough that Claven might one day be invited to sit on Lady Summer's couch.

A ball of flame hit her, and Astrian struggled to scream as the flames engulfed her. She stepped to the side, breathing hard and trying to maintain the connection to Lady Luna, to keep the vision intact. She frowned, looking in surprise at the burned and charred figure lying on the rough road beneath her. It was the ghoul. This was his death.

She looked up, and saw the one who had killed him. A young figure, though misleadingly so. Her aura was not that of a normal mortal. She was a mage, and a powerful one. She was staring at horror at her handiwork.

Astrian watched in surprise as the figure approached, and then fell next to his body, crying openly. None of the other mortals dared to approach, most hiding or retreating indoors. The mage clenched both her fists and ground her teeth, "I will bring you back, Trei. I swear it. I won't give up. I won't lose you."

The mage sat next to her, crying silently. The heart in her hand was slowing, but still beating.

Astrian took a step back in horror, recognising the cave she now found herself in. This was Lady Summer's favourite place, a hidden cave in her garden. She'd endlessly remade it, over and over, until she thought it was perfect.

Nearby, the ghoul was gasping, bleeding and dying, a spear through his chest. His life was bleeding away. It was a spear of Yggdrasil. His magic was blocked. He couldn't restore his life if he wanted to. One hand on the spear, the elf stood, watching the scene, silently, but not unemotionally. She was fighting back tears, and her mind was a race of desperate thoughts, wanting to save the ghoul... And Lady Summer.

Astrian turned, desperately trying to see the face of the body the mage had been crouched over, but the scene had changed already.

She could see herself, quietly watching the ghoul in the garden. Her outward appearance was quiet, but inwards -

Astrian kept her outwards appearance cold, calm and in control as she looked at the ghoul sitting in the garden. Inside, she was anything but. Even now, when he was silent, unmoving, something inside her purred like a hungry cat. Craving his attention, his touch. She wanted to fall at his feet, and beg him to look at her. She fought the impulse. This did not belong to her. It was a curse, handed down by the fates. He belonged to her mistress, not to her.

That thought sparked all sorts of violent ideas.

"Break the link!" Lady Luna screamed inside her skull, and Astrian felt the world slipping



away from her.

---

## First

He stepped out of the shadows and into the light of the fire silently. The master's breathing changed subtly. He kept his face impassive but felt a small spike of glee at having surprised the man, despite the number of years he had served him in this capacity.

Janus waved a hand tiredly, "Report."

He sighed, "The ghoul was a blacksmith's apprentice, without promise, skill, or apparently a future. He was on the verge of being fired for substandard practice. He was killed by a mage. The one who killed him is a female, who has served effectively in a human military force. She has killed somewhere in the region of ten thousand people. He was killed simply because she saw no value in his life, and nor did anyone else. He was given a pauper's burial."

Janus sighed, "Anything else?"

"Personality attributes are interesting." He continued, "The man is a flirt. He finds himself drawn to any attractive female. He had indeed flirted with the one who took his life. I posit that his death was in fact an attempt at gallantry, which failed because he has no worth. He also highly prizes honesty, and finds it difficult to lie, which has led to many making use of him as a scapegoat for their own actions. His sense of morality is much stricter than most Fae, and the values that he holds because of it are unlikely to mesh well into our culture. The values he seems to hold highest are modesty, honesty, generosity, kindness and justice."

Janus' mouth twitched a little. His master was clearly pleased by the combination of assets that his observations suggested. Manipulating this conservative individual wouldn't be difficult. He could already see a half dozen ways to force the man to earn a death penalty.

The master glanced at him, "Is there more, still?"

"Yes." He replied, "It might be worth exploring another option, as well. It appears that the one who killed him, the mage, has regretted her actions. She has begun to experience nightmares. It would not take much to push on these emotions and accentuate her current experience. If she was then provided with a sample of the subject, she would likely attempt a resurrection. She is a highly skilled practitioner, but is not a pyromancer as might first be supposed. She is a summoner. She has open contracts with several multidimensional creatures, including a few Fae. If she were attempt to resurrect the ghoul, she might be able to summon him from our realm back to his, and bind his soul to earth so that he may not return."

Janus blinked in surprise, "And how would that help my goals?"

"The Lady has imprinted upon him." He stated, casually revealing he had also been surveiling her without orders, "She would pursue him, no matter how strong her will. The end result would either be abdication and her permanent stay in the human realm, or more likely, she would breach our barriers to return him to her realm, and in doing so violate many of our unbreakable laws. Thus, charges could be directly brought against her, without need to use the subject as a proxy. The blame would fall on the Lady, and on the human mage, increasing our current xenophobic tendencies towards them. There would be no obvious signs of your involvement, as the human and the Lady shall have acted of their own accord."

Janus couldn't help but smile at the idea, "Now that is devious."

He waited for instructions silently as his master mulled over the idea in his mind. It was already clear what the solution would be. Janus would choose to use the mage, or at least attempt to, with several other plans ready to be enacted at the opportune moment if it should fail.

“How long do you estimate it would take to break this mage’s spirit?” Janus asked, and he shrugged, “Humans are difficult to predict. A more subtle approach, guaranteeing that the interference not be uncovered would take several weeks of increasing nightmares. A less subtle approach, flinging the mage into hysteria, through the use of night terrors would take only two to three days.”

Janus sighed, “Is there any possibility that we could time this so that the mage summons him during the wedding ceremony?”

“Not without doubt.” He replied, “And performing the act early could cause members of the Council to sympathise with the Lady.”

His master sighed, his enthusiasm tempered. “Begin lacing her dreams. We can reorganise and wait the weeks required.”

He faded silently into the shadows.

---

## Summer

Summer opened her eyes tiredly, and sank further into her cocoon. She had no wish to get up today. Wedding planning, a meeting with angry miners and trying to teach a cursed mortal how to fit in with one of the most xenophobic cultures that exist. It was all work, stress and effort. She didn't want to. She wished she could sprinkle some dust and make the whole problem vanish. But she knew the world didn't work that way. Actions have consequences.

Her wings twitched behind her, anxious to unfurl. They were feeling on the edge of cramping.

She sighed and slid forward onto the floor, stretching her wings. She lay there, her face buried in the floor, and sighed heavily. Being a grown up sucked. She wouldn't mind starting over again sometime soon. It'd cause problems, but at least she'd get a solid five years of just playing with toys and laughing.

"Madam."

She glared up at the butler standing over her, "Astrian. I thought you were off for another week."

The woman sighed politely, "Those were your instructions, madam. Unfortunately several things have come to my attention. One is that you are living with a ghoul. The second is that you intend to marry it. And the third is that the ghoul is unaware of our laws."

Summer pushed up onto her knees, and glared, "I asked for alone time with my future husband. I don't think your presence here would assist."

Astrian rolled her eyes slowly, "My Lady. I am aware that you have not participated in carnal relations with the dead. I am here to assist in the creature's transition."

Summer cocked her head, "Transition?"

"The body is dead, but the soul is not." Astrian said slowly as she began to open the wardrobe and select clothing, "Thus, it is possible to return life to the flesh. Making the creature less revolting and allowing you both to explore your romance in a way that does not belong in a graveyard. It would also give myself opportunity to educate the creature on appropriate behaviours towards you and this realm."

Summer pouted. It was a good idea. And if anyone could help bring Trei's body back, it would be her. That would make things a lot less awkward. He was beginning to seriously stink.

She glanced at the clothes in front of her and her eyes widened, "Yeah... You're aware I have held his hand exactly once, right?"

Astrian covered a laugh behind her hand, "Apologies my lady."

"Every time I touch him I get damned visions of the future." She said standing up and grabbing a more modest bra, "To be frank, it's irritating."

Astrian stiffened, "So he really is fated for you, and you for him. That is... Surprising."

Summer shrugged, "There's other reasons that could explain it. He could be a nexus for all we know. He's mortal, and the moment he died I just fluked a resurrection? That's just plain weird."

Astrian sighed, "But it means his soul is important. He could not die if he intended it, fate is twisting reality to preserve him. If the fates have driven the two of you together, then no force or act can deny it."

Summer finished dragging her dress over her head and slipping her wings through the back, “Maybe. Not everything I see is good.”

Astrian shrugged, “Not all fates are good. Destiny is never kind. However, all who fight destiny do nothing but invite it. I shall prepare breakfast in a moment. Perhaps it would be best if you wake him?”

Summer nodded, slipping on a knee-high boot, “Probably... Eh... You’re aware he’s a carnivore, right?”

“Yes.” Astrian shivered, “But I can accept that.”

“Humans like cooked flesh. Apparently.” Summer said, feeling distaste, “They can’t eat most plants.”

Astrian frowned, “That is... Odd.”

---

## Trei

Trei froze looking up in embarrassment at the woman who had popped into existence in his room.

He finished pulling up his pants slowly, and the woman blushed, and then vanished. He scratched his head and then pulled on his t-shirt, wincing at the smell. Having only the one set of clothes was beginning to be a problem.

He shuffled out to the kitchen, pausing as he saw someone new. Not the same woman as before, but another, standing by the fire. The woman turned around, and he immediately felt the need to straighten up. The woman bowed her head slightly, "Sir. I am known as Astrian. I am the caretaker of this location. The Lady Summer has been called to deal with a situation. I shall be assisting you today."

He felt a little tongue-tied as he stumbled out a sentence, "Uh... Thanks... Um... There was... Someone in my room?"

Astrian raised an eyebrow, "Someone in your room, sir?"

"For a moment. A... Woman?"

Astrian frowned, "Was she Fae or mortal?"

"Fae. I think." He paused, "She caught me getting changed, got embarrassed and vanished. She had... Silver hair?"

Astrian nodded slowly, "I see. Well, sir, I'm afraid the guest bedroom you are utilising was the regular bedroom of a Fae. Her name is Luna, and it appears she came without knocking. I shall remind her to show more caution and etiquette whilst we have guests. She may not return, having embarrassed herself in meeting you in such a way, or may offer an apology."

Trei nodded slowly, "Rightio."

"No sir, not 'rightio.'" Astrian said, a hint of disgust in her voice, "I see my lessons are well-needed. Sit a moment, your breakfast is prepared."

He sat down at the table awkwardly, not quite sure what was going on, or how he had offended the Fae. She placed a warm plate with roasted rabbit in front of him, as well as a silver knife and fork. Then she sat down opposite and nodded, "You may eat, we have quite a day ahead of us."

Trei began cutting the meat, "So... What does that mean?"

"That you are a rude, arrogant child." Astrian replied haughtily, "I will educate you on manners, and attempt to make you less offensive to the Fae. You have offended me every time you have spoken this morning, sir. You speak hesitantly, without confidence, and the questions you ask are indirect and broad. That is impolite. If you truly have no idea to the answer of a question, you must rephrase the question in a less offensive manner. Instead of 'what does that mean', ask instead, 'can you educate me on your meaning'. It is direct, assertive, without trying to admit fault."

Trei nodded, and Astrian glared, "Assert, sir. You hesitated just now. In Fae culture, that means that you do not trust me, and are considering whether it is worth your time to cause me harm. It's a threat. Do humans value deference in this way?"

"Yes." Trei replied simply, shrugging, "If I were to assert myself to my master, he'd probably punch me in the face."

Astrian sighed, "Better, but drop the probably next time. Interesting. Humans value outward weakness?"

“Not as such.” Trei drummed his fingers for a moment, “Humans value... Hierarchy. I was merely an apprentice, and so my master must be shown respect by myself not appearing equal to him. That isn’t seen as weakness, but justice of a sort.”

Astrian paused in shock, and Trei raised an eyebrow. Astrian nodded, “Apologies. Culture shock is quite shocking. Humans bow to their leaders as a sign of reverence, then. Here, it would be little more than an offence so great as to require a duel to settle the manner. I highly recommend you avoid such a circumstance from occurring.”

Trei nodded, glancing at his body, “I’m starting to get the hang of walking. I doubt I’d be much of a fight, not that I was when I was alive.”

“Sir.” Astrian reminded him gently and Trei shrugged, “That is the past. I don’t know the limits of a ghou, and that should be a threat to any opponent.”

The housekeeper smiled, “Good. I will also be assisting you with the matter of your ghoulishness, sir. The Lady Summer has nearly boundless power, but she is not educated on all manners of magic, and thus your resurrection was little more than an accident, though perhaps an inevitable one. I however, am highly educated in living magic, known to Faekind as Gaia.”

Trei held up a hand, “Educate me. Why would this have been inevitable?”

Astrian looked distressed, “Sir. Well spoken. However, I have said more than I should have, and overstepped. It is within your authority to force me to explain, but I would rather not. Please, take no offence.”

Trei cocked his head, “Why would I have any such authority over you, Astrian? I’m a dead mortal. I know Lady Summer is... Important, but not how... And we aren’t married yet.”

Astrian hesitated, and Trei glared, wondering if it was the right response. Hesitation might mean offence, or simply that he caught her off guard. The Fae were a strange race. He’d have to do a balancing act every time he spoke to one, it seemed.

“She can’t answer that either.” A new voice, almost musical, said from a nearby doorway.

Trei glanced over and saw a small-ish Fae, holding her nose, her wings were rolled up on her back, and her silver eyes were framed by identical long hair that flowed down to her waist. He smiled, “Oh. Sorry about before.”

The Fae looked away quickly, her face turning red, “Please sir, don’t mention it. Ever.”

He grinned at the force of the last word, “Would you like to join us? Astrian is attempting to educate me on your people.”

“Not really.” The woman said, still holding her nose, “Maybe once you’ve eaten. I just came to apologise, m’lord.”

Trei felt his heart skip a beat, surprised by the implication. Both Fae turned and stared at him openly, and Trei looked from one to the other, “Educate me.”

Astrian laughed, “You might try a variety of words, sir. We were waiting to see if you just... Died.”

He scratched his head, and the silver-haired woman spoke with irritation, “Your heart, idiot. It beat. You’re dead. You aren’t meant to have a heartbeat... Sir.”

Trei really liked this one. Calling him out before remembering he was supposed to be important for some reason no one could tell him. “So, what would your name be, miss?”

She glared at him, “You have your work cut out for you Astrian, making this idiot fit in. I’m guessing you didn’t mean to insult me just now.”

Trei shrugged, “If you’re going to come by later, I need to know your name.”

The Fae bristled with anger, and Trei felt himself struggling to contain his laughter. She certainly looked cute when she got riled up. Then a thought occurred to him and he immediately flatlined. If Summer found out he was flirting with another Fae she might kill him, or worse. Or the Council might use it as an excuse to hurt Summer.

“I am the Lady Luna.” She growled between clenched teeth that Trei suddenly realised were all fangs, “I am the Crown Princess, the Shadow Knight of the Evening Realms, and Guardian of the Shrine.”

Trei fought the urge to appear terrified, “Apologies, m’lady.”

Luna sighed, turning to Astrian, “I’ll be in the garden when you’re done in here. There’s a few things I have to discuss with the idiot.”

She stormed out the door, and Trei heard Astrian slowly let out a held breath. He turned back to her, “Crown Princess. Did I just offend the daughter of the Queen? Do the Fae have a Queen?”

Astrian nodded, “Yes, we have a Queen. The Queen heads the Council, and is bound by it. So not a queen as in mortal terms. However, the queen has always lead our Council, and they have always advised her. It is not an experiment in democracy, such as the city from whence you came. As to your first question, Princess Luna is not the daughter of the Queen, but rather her sister. It is a prestigious position, but not the one that demands the most respect. She listed some of her titles for you, in reversing order. The Guardian of the Shrine is one of the highest positions that any can have in our culture, and in times of war or crisis, the Guardian is capable of overruling the Council.”

Trei looked down, “Oh.”

Astrian sighed, “Many things will be difficult, sir. You will learn how to cope with some of them in time, however not offending the Princess is one I do not expect you to master. I have sent the Lady into a rage on more than one occasion. She is difficult to please. I am somewhat confused by her actions here, however. It appears that you made her uncomfortable, and so she took a greater offence than was necessary. Perhaps the smell, or the incident earlier.”

Trei sighed, “I guess I’d better eat, so the two of you can educate me.”

“One more matter, sir. I said I could help you with your current state.” Astrian spoke as he ate quickly, “It appears the Princess also wishes to assist. Gaia, our living magic, may allow us to more tightly integrate your soul to your body. This will not cure your death, but it will allow your soul to take a few actions, such as beginning to heal the burns across you.”

Trei grinned, “Can it help with the smell?”

“Yes.” Astrian replied, struggling not to laugh at his eagerness, “As will a shower and new clothes. We will also deal with those.”

---



## Luna

Luna felt like kicking herself. She really hadn't meant to get so angry at the idiot. He was just so... Mortal. Human. It just wasn't fair! Why did he have to go and be a clueless idiot when he... Was him.

She stared at her feet. That was the problem, wasn't it?

The door opened beside her, and Astrian spoke quietly, "I have sent him to bathe in the waterfall at the far end of the garden."

Luna nodded silently.

Astrian sighed heavily, "I need to know, m'lady."

"Yes." Luna growled, grinding her teeth, "And I have no idea why or how."

Astrian swallowed nervously, "And I, mistress."

Luna turned to her, eyes widening, "You? You of all people, Astrian? How does that work?"

The butler shrugged, "I am beyond my own understanding, m'lady. I do not understand how this has occurred, and I do not believe our extensive records include a single case alike to it. We are beyond the knowledge of the Fae, now. I fear that we tread upon dangerous territory."

Luna shrugged, "Summer resurrected him. She had him first. We'll just need to find a way to cope with that."

"I am to help bind his soul." Astrian replied, "I do not believe spending such large amounts of time with the mortal will be wise. I only have limited reserves of perseverance."

Luna turned and punched the wall lightly, causing the wood to ripple, "This isn't fair. It shouldn't be possible. I thought... Are the fates just screwing with us? Trying to hurt Faekind?"

Astrian shrugged, "Perhaps you can petition the Queen to speak to them."

Luna rolled her eyes, "As if she would. We'd have to tell her. And well... She's possessive."

Astrian nodded, "True, but I am afraid that I must inform her all the same. It is my duty."

Luna glared at her, but knew it was true. This was too big a secret to keep from Summer. Especially if he had this effect on all female Fae. Was that something that was possible? She winced at the thought openly, "We must contain this. The Garden must be sealed."

"The wedding." Astrian said slowly, "Containing it won't matter in two days. Half the realm will be in attendance, and most of the rest will be watching through magical means. Even if the effect can only happen in-person, it will be a crisis worthy of your title."

Luna nodded, wincing as she heard uneven footsteps. She turned, intending to glare pure hatred towards the man, but instead found herself barely containing a smile as she saw him, still drying his hair. Despite the burns and the start of rotting flesh, something inside her was triggering every happy emotion that her brain could handle.

---

## Summer

Summer paced back and forth, her wings flapping nervously.

Three mages nearby were focused, eyes closed, hands outstretched as sweat poured off them in rivulets. Their wings hung limply and dripped as they focused on the breach in front of them. They wouldn't last much longer.

She turned, eyeing the breach carefully. She still didn't understand its nature, she couldn't seal it. All anyone could do was hold it back. The wait and analyse approach wasn't working. She might gain a small amount of knowledge from allowing the breach to grow, but the danger was too much.

Summer held out one hand, seizing control of the magic of the three mages, who collapsed gratefully to the ground. A single bead of sweat grew on her forehead as she concentrated, keeping a firm hold on this tear in her reality.

Her reality.

Magic flowed into her, more than she needed to hold the breach. Her wings flared open, shining like a golden star, and her eyes began to glow, obscuring them. Her hair slowly floated upwards, flecks of gold light dancing around them as she filled herself with mana, filled to overflowing.

She could softly hear one of the mage's attempting to tiredly protest, but she was only dimly aware of them. The world was fading away from her, the colours turning to darkness, and the inhabitants to dust. She was rising above the concerns of a petty present and into something more.

She took a single step closer to the breach, revealing the tether that had created it. Mana was pouring down the tether, more than she was filled with. She knew of no creature, mortal or immortal, who could generate that much power. It had to be an artefact, which suggested a mortal was behind this blatant attack. Stored magic, stored over aeons, being utilised in a hamfisted attempt to enter her realm.

Summer walked forward, and into the breach.

She felt her physical frame being stripped apart, each fibre and fragment of her being was disassembled. The destructive force that had unravelled the edge of her realm unravelled her. Yet, even in this state, it had not destroyed her. She was more than simply a physical shell, and her power allowed her to hold onto that. She followed the mana stream, allowing the storm that raged down the tether to wash over her, rejuvenating her.

Summer arrived at the destination and reassembled herself as she stepped into the mortal world.

The darkened room flared into light in her magic-infused presence, and she turned her eyes to the mortal, bleeding and sweating as one hand was held against a crystal embedded in the earth. The crystal was as tall as Summer at first glance, but the beat of mana in it showed it ran deeper, into a vein of magically-infused crystal that lead deeper than anyone had ever travelled. This was a weapon more powerful than any mortalkind had ever possessed.

"Cease, mortal." She growled.

The metal-wearing creature looked up at her, with tears in its eyes, "I can't. I have to bring him back. It's my fault."

Summer snapped her fingers, and the hand of the creature was separated cleanly. It howled and fell backwards, but the magical stream of destruction leaving the crystal ceased.

Summer felt the breach close, and let the magic drain out of her. Her hair fell, and the light faded to a dull glow, and she crouched by the mortal, lifting her up gently. She held her as she healed the dismembered hand. “Easy. You weren’t helping anyone just now, mortal.”

The warrior stared at her, “I need to bring him back. Please.”

“You tore a hole in my reality, nothing more.” Summer stated, “You can’t resurrect the dead that way. If the soul is gone, then it’s difficult to get it back.”

The warrior frowned, “His soul wasn’t gone. I traced it. He was in... I guess it’s your world.”

Summer’s eyes widened in terror, “Trei. You mean Trei.”

The warrior sat up, looking at her out of tear-stained eyes, “He’s alive?”

“No.” Summer stated carefully, “But not dead. I already resurrected him.”

The warrior stared at her, “What? Why?”

Summer sighed heavily, “I... Look. You just attacked my people. If you want to see Trei, I can arrange it. He’s staying at my house. But... A mortal is only allowed to visit under certain circumstances, or the other Fae will freak and kill you. The Arbiter hates mortals, and he’s just as powerful as me. He’s the one I’ll have to convince.”

The warrior breathed a sigh of relief, “He’s alive... I’m... Sorry. I... I regretted it. Then... His body was gone. I didn’t know what to do.”

Summer held up a hand, glaring at the warrior, “There is something in your eye, mortal.”

The warrior blinked, “What?”

Summer tossed her to the ground easily, baring her fangs and she grabbed the black dot and heaved. A flailing snake of shadow magic screeched as it was torn out. The mortal screamed in pain, grabbing her eye socket as blood poured from it.

Summer killed the snake, crushing the neck, and looked down at the mortal, “Well, it seems you were not entirely in control of your actions.”

The warrior stood up, shaking angrily, “What was that? Answer, Fae.”

“Magic.” She shrugged, holding out the black dust, “Have you seen this before?”

The warrior nodded slowly, “Yes, unfortunately. Black Faen dust. The mark of a warrior who guards the borders of your worlds. I’ve never seen it cause nightmares before. Usually just death or insanity.”

Summer frowned, “I can’t repair your eye, warrior. Magic has costs.”

“I know.” The warrior replied, “I knew enough to track a person through realms. I am not inexperienced.”

Summer cocked her head, “You’re the mage that killed Trei, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t see him.” She replied bitterly, looking down, “I didn’t expect the idiot to intervene. I didn’t even look before I tossed the fireball.”

Summer laughed, “A mortal who can toss fireballs without focusing? You are unusual.”

“I am.” The mage replied, “I am the Queen Vastras, Fae. I am the most powerful magic user on this continent, apart from your kind.”

Summer paused, considering the moment. This was delicate. “I apologise that I attacked you, but the creature that embedded itself in you was not sanctioned, your ladyship.”

The mage shrugged, “You seemed as confused as I... Though I have never heard of a Fae as powerful as you protecting the borders. Were you sanctioned by the Council in your intervention?”

Summer grinned, “So you know of the Council, then. Interesting. No, I wasn’t sanctioned, but I don’t actually require their approval to protect my own realm.”

The mage paused, “You rule a realm, then? Or are you something like an Arbiter?”

“I am Queen Summer.” She replied coolly, “I lead the Council. I created my realm under the direction of Sumner, our creator.”

The mage smiled slowly, “The Queen of Faekind, and the Queen of a city. I believe you win.”

“I don’t care about that.” Summer replied, “I’d prefer peace between our peoples. Fae are... Isolationists, by nature. We’d prefer to never have to interact with your kind. If someone is attacking you... They are a threat to me.”

Vastras smiled as she began bandaging her eye, “As they are to me. Why did you take Trei?”

“I... Resurrected him by accident.” Summer replied bitterly.

Vastras stared at her, “I hardly understand, Queen Fae. Resurrection is a skill. Even with awe-inspiring power, it is a difficult task.”

“No.” Summer retorted, “It isn’t. It’s a skill for those who aren’t overflowing with magic.”

The mage spun up a simple spell, and flinched at the results, “How in the gods are you alive?”

Summer laughed, “I’ll take that as a compliment. I was the first Fae to be created, if that helps you understand. My mere presence can cause... Problems. Its why I avoid the mortal realm. But, political tensions on my world made me seek out a fresh supply of coal in yours. I sneezed, and Trei came back to life.”

The mage walked back and forth a moment, “Did you see visions at his resurrection?”

Summer stared, “Yes. How do you know that?”

“You imprinted on him.” Vastras said bitterly, “That’s why you’re being possessive. Understandable.”

“Speak.” Summer growled angrily, and Vastras shrugged, “I’ve met and tortured Fae in the past. I know more of your worlds than I care to admit. I’ve even journeyed to one of your realms before, and spent three days there before I was detected. Your Arbiter was quite difficult to avoid, but he eventually forgot me.”

Summer felt her thoughts reeling. “Why did you suspect that I imprinted? And how in the blazes did you escape Janus? The man is persistent.”

“He also believes all mortals have a fixed lifespan.” Vastras replied casually, “I suspected you imprinted, because I did. I was not aware that humans were capable of imprinting, until he brushed my hand whilst I was showing him how I wanted my dagger prepared for runic work. In doing so, a part of my soul became tangled with his. I felt his death, Queen Fae.”

Summer felt her mouth go dry. If Trei had this effect on more than just her... This could cause havoc. War. And she’d left him alone with a female Fae.

“I need to return to Trei.” Summer said quickly, “I left him in the care of another.”

Vastras looked up at her, “That was unwise, Queen. I expect you to communicate with me, or I will invade your world. This situation is not resolved, nor forgiven.”

Summer nodded, “You will hear from me shortly.”

---

## Janus

Janus glanced over at the shadow, “What is it?”

“Complications.” The man replied, “The mage was attacked by Lady Summer.”

Janus sighed, “So the mortal is dead. Wonderful. We’ll try another tactic.”

“No, sir.” The assassin replied, “The mage is not dead. She instead seems to have formed an alliance of sorts with the Queen.”

Janus felt his eye bulge and he glared, “What did you do, idiot?”

“Not I, sir.” The assassin replied flatly, “It appears that the dead one is a mortal of not inconsiderable importance, despite appearances to the contrary. Both the Queen and the mage have imprinted upon him.”

Janus frowned, “So, this mortal is dangerous, then.”

“I have also confirmed that Lady Luna, and the Queen’s handmaiden, Astrian, have also imprinted on this dead creature.”

Janus felt astonishment hit him like a brick wall, “What? How could any mortal be the fate of so many? Even beyond his own death?”

The shadow shrugged silently.

Janus smiled slowly, “They’re all female, aren’t they? We should ensure the wedding goes ahead smoothly, and publicly. It’ll throw all the realms into chaos. I can control that, and save us.”

“It is possible that the fates are actively preventing the destruction of this mortal creature.” The assassin cautioned, but Janus was no longer listening. The weapon he wanted to use to gut the Queen was at her right hand. All he had to do was wait, and the situation would resolve itself without his intervention.

Possibly. He never invested himself totally in a single course of events, to do so would allow the fates to idly direct the course of your life towards their own ends. Purposes that were unclear. He wasn’t entirely certain what motivated the fates to do what they did. Perhaps a primal instinct for carnage and drama, or just a love of chaos itself. His every action they opposed openly, whilst he knew they could not interfere if the queen was to attempt anything.

That the queen had a treaty with them, whilst he was treated as nothing more than a toy was an aggravation that he would never forget. He would force the fates to come to the table, and to deal with him personally.

The coming wedding was one such weapon he had. He knew the fates were already twisting outcomes, trying to do something. To prevent the wedding from taking place. Maybe this stupid undead creature was a plaything of theirs. That would explain how so many could imprint on him, and why a mortal had done so. Perhaps. He could use the wedding as a lever, to force the fates to act.

They would either support him, or guarantee non-interference. Those were the only terms that Janus would accept, in the end.

---

## Trei

Trei was focused, eyes closed, listening to the garden.

He could hear the wings of the two women, the buzz of insects in the grass. Somewhere overhead a bird was calling. His hands were spread, feeling tiny blades of grass interwoven with them. Beyond all the sounds and smells, he could feel something else, like a heartbeat. He listened to it, feeling the world slowly fading away from him. A spark of light flowing up his fingers and into him.

Chaos erupted.

Trei's eyes sprang open as he felt the earth explode beneath him. He grabbed his arm with a force and tossed it downward, seizing the ground and skidding to a stop. He looked upwards, expecting to see an attacker.

Instead he saw Summer, blazing with light, standing where he had been.

She glared at the other two Fae, who were standing perfectly still, but he could see fear in their eyes. "Summer!"

Her head turned slowly, and she saw him and sighed, the light fading from her eyes and wings. "Treï. Shut up."

He stood up, not understanding, "They were trying to help me, Summer."

"Shut. Up." She growled, and he felt the ground rumble. He winced, and the woman seemed to try and contain herself, still shaking with anger. "You two, we need to have a talk, especially about boundaries."

Trei was left in confusion as the three vanished from sight.

He looked back at where he had been sitting, and watched slowly as dirt trickled back into the hole, healing itself slowly. It was if nothing had happened.

He had no idea what had got her so riled up. He also knew that Summer wasn't just the woman he'd seen so far. That display had terrified the other two, and could have killed him easily. Well... Something. He wasn't entirely sure if it were possible to die, or just become disembodied.

He sat down to wait, crossing his arms.

---

## Summer

Summer grabbed the two Fae, squeezing them to her as she burst into tears.

Luna's heart rate skyrocketed, "Summer? What?"

Her sister pulled back, looking at them both sadly, "I have... I don't know why. But the woman who killed Trei also imprinted on him."

Luna closed her eyes, feeling her heart burn. "Oh."

Her sister touched her cheek, "I'm sorry. I... I just wanted to stop it, but I was late."

Luna swallowed, "It only took seeing him once."

Astrian laughed beside her, "You imprinted when you saw him naked?"

Summer grabbed her chin, and Luna looked at her sister's angry eyes as she could feel her breath on her face, "You saw him naked?"

Luna winced, "I shifted into my room. I'm sorry. I didn't expect to see anybody, let alone a dead guy getting dressed. And he wasn't entirely naked."

Summer fought with herself, letting go of her sister, "I really wanted to just kill you right now... Damn I hate him. I can't control what I feel."

Luna half-smiled, "The feeling is mutual. Guy just walks around and I get pulled along."

Summer turned to Astrian, "How are you still in control?"

"I am jealous." The Fae replied, shrugging, "However I have spent lifetimes in service to you, my Queen. I have learned to control when I will act. An essential skill for all who serve another."

Summer laughed, "I think you just insulted me, Astrian."

"My Lady." Luna interrupted, "What are we going to do? If every girl who sees that bastard imprints..."

Summer shrugged, "I am uncertain... I believe an investigation as to whether he was always like this in the mortal world is necessary. In the meantime, we need an excuse to delay the wedding."

Astrian frowned, "That is unlikely to be granted by Janus, m'lady."

"The mortal he imprinted on was attacked by black dust." Summer said, "It caused her to try and rip a hole in my reality, to get him back."

"Janus was trying to get her to steal him." Luna said slowly, "To make you break the law to get him back. He's been watching. He knows the imprint is real... So he's probably seen us act like idiots, too."

Astrian sighed, "There is an option, my queen. Seek a stay, so that we can improve the condition of soul and flesh. The Right of Durian should permit a day or two to allow a healing process. The Council's vote will be divided, but it may work."

Summer shrugged, "A day or two isn't going to help much. We have no records of any mortal ever having this effect on anyone."

Luna nodded, "Right. But we know why the effect exists."

The queen looked at her, "Sister, please don't be suggesting that-"

Luna interrupted her, "Go to the Fates. Demand an explanation. None of us can, but you can."



“Janus will use that against us.” Summer growled, “Proof I don’t really want to love him.”

“You can send an emissary, if you’re dealing with a crisis.” Luna replied, “Send me, whilst you return to investigate how a mortal managed to rip a hole in the Garden.”

Her sister seemed conflicted and then turned slowly, “That leaves you in charge of protecting him, Astrian. And if you kiss him, I’ll eat your soul.”

Astrian blushed and spoke weakly, “I will restrain myself.”

Summer glared, “I mean it. I will kill you, and you will never return.”

Luna felt herself speaking before she could stop herself, “I think that goes for all of us, Summer.”

The queen shot her a glare, and Luna looked down, kicking herself.

Summer sighed, “Gods I hate imprints. Look, none of us is really in control. We hate each other because of him. Hopefully, that isn’t long term.”

Luna looked up, “Give me the key. More distance between me and him, the better.”

Her sister handed over a brass key, “The Fates won’t be happy with this. They will probably torture you first.”

Luna smiled weakly, “Yay. Aren’t they wonderful?”

Then she turned and stepped sideways through the walls of reality.

---

## Vastras

Vastras looked at her workbench. The ruins of her eyes were placed in the centre, and an un-runed but prepared dagger lay to the left. On the right where a half dozen crystal fragments. Useful stones containing small pieces of elemental magic.

Her socket still ached, and she wasn't used to the missing vision yet. It would take time, and she couldn't afford any weakness just now. Events were moving, and coming to a head. Decades of planning and plotting were about to unravel because of a stupid human boy. He wasn't even a decent blacksmith, just your average shlub... And his death had made her reveal the greatest weapon in her arsenal. It would have allowed her enemies to pinpoint her location.

The balance of power had been tipped against her, by the Fae that had placed nightmares inside her head. However, it wasn't a total disaster. Black Faen dust. She'd never seen it before. It represented a new kind of magic, a clearly potent one. All she had to do was extract it, and learn how to utilise it. A difficult task, but she'd spent most of her life learning to master all kinds of magic. Adding one more to her repertoire was just another task, not an insurmountable challenge.

First though, she had to extract it. She selected a small white crystal, and gently held the warm gemstone in her hand. The light crept into her, flowing into her veins. Vastras winced as she felt the magic burning her as it intertwined with her, filling her. She felt her eyes begin to burn, screaming. Eyes, plural. The magic linked her to the discarded and broken orbit lying on the table in front of her. Being able to see herself, albeit bleakly, was disconcerting. She immediately felt the stain of the black dust attack her, trying to force itself inside her head, not realising that she wasn't really attached to the eye anymore. So the magic was alive then, like most. It possessed a level of instinctual intelligence.

Vastras took up the smooth blade, the blade that Trei had prepared for her. Her heart twisted, stabbing her. Making her relive his death, over and over. Making her relive her horror as she realised he had dashed after the thief in a misguided attempt at gallantry. The mage stabbed the knife down into her eye angrily. The pain split her head, and vision. The shadow inside the eyes screamed, wrapping itself around the knife. She let go of it quickly. The magical essence found itself without an attacker to possess, with a knife stuck inside its host.

It only had one option.

The creature attempted to possess the knife, so it could remove it. But, it was a bare runic blade. Designed so that magic could enter, but would not leave. Vastras smiled weakly, holding her head as she felt the dark magic flow out of her popped eyeball and into the knife. She let go the white crystal, letting it tumble onto the table as she fell backwards onto the ground. Too tired, too weak.

However, the mage looked up at the bronze blade, now a pitch black, with barely visible runes scrawled into the length of the blade, and she smiled. "Got you."

---

## Astrian

Astrian kept her outwards appearance cold, calm and in control as she looked at the ghoulish figure sitting in the garden. Inside, she was anything but. Even now, when he was silent, unmoving, something inside her purred like a hungry cat. Craving his attention, his touch. She wanted to fall at his feet, and beg him to look at her. She fought the impulse. This did not belong to her. It was a curse, handed down by the Fates. He belonged to her mistress, not to her.

That thought sparked all sorts of violent ideas.

The butler sighed, examining his progress, trying to focus on her work. She was surprised. "Sir, you appear to have mastered this first step far faster than I anticipated. Perhaps I should teach you a more advanced technique."

Trei opened his eyes, and looked at his hands, at the fading scars where this morning his skin had been blistered and rotting. "It almost feels like rediscovery, as if I've done this before."

Astrian smiled wryly, "In a way, sir, you have. This is a subconscious process that all creatures do at some level. Directing cells to repair the structures that comprise our physical shells. As a ghoulish figure, all that is different is that the energy to form the process must be obtained from an external force."

Trei looked at the grass around him, dying. He seemed sad. Astrian fought herself to stop from showing any emotion. That brief look of pain on his face made her wish to burst into tears, to hug and hold him, and reassure him. She didn't, though. She had a duty. If he was to live, then sacrifice was necessary, even if that sacrifice was her own eternal happiness. That was her duty, her sworn vow of a dozen lifetimes. She was the servant of her Queen, and no other.

"We all consume, at some level, sir." Astrian said slowly, walking over to a tree and plucking a leaf, "If I consume this, it will grant me energy, but it will die. If I do not consume it, it will still die, and the energy will flow into the ground instead. There is endless cycle of living magic that flows through this world. You died, and rejoined this stream. When you were dragged out of it, an imbalance was created. It will take time, for you and the world, but that balance will be rectified."

Trei sighed, leaning back, unknowingly revealing the muscles in his arms, the muscles of a blacksmith's apprentice. "Natural imbalances are usually rectified by storms, aren't they? Educate me, Astrian. What does a magical re-balance look like?"

She hid her smile. He was cute when he tried to assert himself, like a puppy dog growling and protecting a mace-wielding owner from a small rat. "Failure, to put it simply, sir. Alchemical experiments will have a higher rate of failure. Magical rebounds from broken spells will be more common, and more violent. You are hardly the first being to be resurrected, sir. Surely you have noticed seasons where magic is less effective? That these cycles come and go, and seem unrelated to natural phenomena?"

"Magic is uncommon in my world." Trei shrugged, looking at her with those intense soulless eyes of his, "I just did busy work at the forge. Now and then I guess some rune blades didn't work as well as normal... But I usually took the blame for that, and I didn't see anything wrong with it. I was never the best. I made the cheap stuff, the best was made by my master."

Astrian nodded slowly, "Apologies, sir. Magic is as common as breathing here. It is difficult to picture a world where not everyone has learned the skill."

"Not every mortal can, as far as I'm aware." Trei laughed softly, and Astrian swallowed, fighting the nervousness that suddenly seemed to catch her breathing, making her aware of her every

movement and thought. “Sir, I’m afraid I must correct you. Magic is a skill like any other. All mortals are capable of it. I would suggest that those who are born with talent are the only ones who discover it... But...”

She hesitated, kicking herself for insulting him. She wasn’t sure if she should tell him. Summer would probably be angry. The Lady would likely wish to teach him herself, or to protect him from it altogether. Knowing magic came with risks. It broadcast you to every other magic user. He could become a target, and without the skill that most Fae had, he would be in constant danger.

Trei sighed, “Summer. That’s what you’re thinking, aren’t you? Wondering if she’d want me to know. I can’t answer it... But I doubt it. So, thank you for the offer, Astrian, but I’ll stick to learning to repair myself.”

The way her name tumbled so casually from his mouth when it struck against her mind like a thunderclap was distracting. It took her a moment to understand, and she shook her head, “Sir, you are... Incorrect in an assumption you have made. I apologise, but I must correct it. When you heal yourself, through this meditation... You are performing magic. Not Gaia, though alike to it in some ways. It is a magic I do not fully understand, and I do believe that among the Fae only two have truly mastered it. One by birthright, and the other through a lifetime of study.”

Trei looked at his hands and sighed, “Necromancy. Isn’t it?”

“Confidence.” She snapped quickly, trying to act the teacher, “You are, of course, correct. One of the benefits of necromancy you may not be aware of, sir, is that no magic user who has not mastered it can detect its usage. Thus, it is safe for you to learn and use. The Lady would likely wish to protect you from other magic, as it would attract attention from the Fae, and we have all mastered our magics over multiple lifetimes.”

Trei laughed and stood up, stretching, “Best not to attract attention. So, Astrian. What is next?”

Her heart fluttered as she looked at him. His mangled face was nearly gone, revealing a ruggedly handsome face pitted with scar tissue. His eyes were empty and soulless, but as intense as the sun. His hair hung loosely, messy and tangled. He held himself easily, but every sinew in his body was honed. She felt a craving to stand beside him, and trace her fingers against the rigid muscles that formed his biceps.

“Astrian?” He asked in confusion, and she realised she was staring. She looked away, feeling her cheeks redden, “Perhaps I should summon someone to assist you. Do you know what a traditional Fae wedding looks like, sir?”

Trei walked over as she could see him, looking at her with concern, “I’m sorry if I offended you, Astrian.”

Idiot. Stupid little ghoulish idiot. She wasn’t insulted, she was embarrassed. But she couldn’t tell him that his voice made her go weak at the knees. Couldn’t tell him that there were others, bound to him by fate. That he was now the central player in a game that would rock the foundations of Faen society. That civil war might well break out because of him.

“I am not offended, sir.” Astrian said coolly, “You will have to perform certain functions, sir. It would be best if you could be guided through them, such as by the priest who will bless the union as you declare an undying vow of allegiance to the Lady Summer.”

“Priest?” Trei asked in surprise, “I thought... Fae don’t worship the gods, do they?”

“Assert yourself.” Astrian cautioned him, “The priest’s function is different. They do not act

as intermediary to the gods. Rather, they act as arbiters on behalf of our queen. A priest will be present, and will be performing the Right, as a representation that the government has approved of your marriage.”

Trei shrugged, “So it is more of a legal function then. We have that too. People who go and get married by city leaders. But there isn’t normally a ceremony when they do that.”

“The ceremony is extensive.” Astrian replied, “You will have various roles you must perform flawlessly. I cannot educate you in all of them.”

Trei clearly wasn’t buying her excuse. She could see it in his body language, and in his lifeless eyes. “Why are you trying to run away?”

Astrian flinched as if she’d been hit.

---

## Ashwen

The Fae was quiet as she cleaned the house, dusting and arranging the crystals containing the memories that her father could no longer retain. It wouldn't be very long until his rebirth. She wondered about that. He had not yet seen fit to name someone as his guardian the next life. She'd never had that opportunity yet. He had always been hers, but he always sort another to her. She'd never managed to make him proud of her, not proud enough to believe she had surpassed him.

There was a solid sound, and Ashwen turned, looking down the hall to the doorway in surprise. She hadn't expected any visitors today. Not with what the council was dealing with at the moment.

She drifted over lightly, and swung the door open, curtsying as she did.

"No need for that, Lady Ashwen."

She looked up in surprise at the blue-haired Fae, who smiled at her warmly, and she swallowed nervously, "Lord Arbiter."

He gestured, "May I come in?"

"Lord Ashwith is not home, at present." She replied tentatively and the Arbiter grinned, "That's fine by me, I came to see you, Lady Ashwen."

She stepped back from the doorway, slightly in shock and mostly in awe. The Arbiter was as high above her as she was an insect. That he considered her someone worthy of speaking to was news to her, and yet he hadn't sent a messenger to fetch her, he came in person, without an entourage, to speak to her in her home. He hadn't done this since he chose her a lifetime ago.

She nervously guided him to a sitting room, lit with the midday sun, and moved to the nearby kitchen to begin preparing tea. As she reached for the pot, she felt a hand catch hers, and looked sideways in surprise. The Arbiter smiled at her, "Enough, m'lady. You should sit, I am perfectly capable of preparing tea."

"You are my guest, sir." She replied in surprise, and he shrugged, "But you have clearly been on your feet all day. Allow me to take care of you."

She didn't feel like she had a choice. He was only asking, but his word was practically law. He and the Queen stood head and shoulders above all others. She curtsied and moved into the sitting room, sitting slowly and uncomfortably on a wooden chair by the small table. She looked out the window, not sure what to do with herself. No one had ever waited on her before. She had always played the role of servant.

She could see out the window, to the other houses in the street. The paint was cracked and peeling on most of them, and she could see a few houses that were beginning to show signs of structural stress. It was her duty to maintain the upkeep of this small realm, but she didn't have the magic to spare. Her father might, but he was rarely interested enough in the other Fae they shared the realm with, so it fell to her.

"Here we go." The Arbiter said with mirth, and she turned as he placed a silver platter in front of her, with a steaming cup of rose leaves and a small roasted peppermint leaf beside it on the saucer. She wasn't sure where he'd got either ingredient, she certainly didn't have any available.

"I summoned a few things from home." He answered her unspoken question, and then sat beside her, relaxing. He picked up his cup, and held it in both hands as he breathed in the fumes. "It's been a while since I took the time to appreciate these things."

Ashwen smiled nervously, picking up her own cup and sipping at the hot liquid. Her eyes

sparkled as she tasted it. So this was what the rank of Arbiter gave you access to. It was astonishing. She idly wondered how expensive or difficult it was to summon something of this quality, and quickly reasoned it was far out of her reach.

“Lady Ashwen,” he began, “I’ve come to ask a favour of you, to do with the upcoming nuptials of our queen.”

She looked over at him in surprise, “A favour? How could I assist you, m’lord?”

“Tradition.” He stated flatly, “It is tradition that the Arbiter attend the marriages of such high ranking officials with an entourage, of a sort. I have ignored it in recent generations, but this is a more important event than most. Now, more than ever, we must remember where we come from and what it means to be Fae.”

Ashwen felt her heart move awkwardly as her anxiety skyrocketed. “Are you requesting that I be in this entourage?”

“I am requesting that you be the work of art that adorns my arm for the evening.” The Arbiter replied with an easy smile, “I am requesting a chance, Lady Ashwen, to show that we might entertain a relationship. I do not wish this merely for tradition. I would say however, it is a wonderful excuse to finally ask you.”

He was asking her out.

That he even remembered her name was news to her. She couldn’t believe that he’d been looking for an excuse to ask her on a date. This had to be politics. The tight intrigues of state.

“I should point out, Lady Ashwen, I can hear your thoughts.” The Arbiter whispered.

She turned red and quickly turned to stare out the window. “If this was just politics, Lady Ashwen, then I would not go to these efforts. A request would be made to you, and to Lord Ashwith, by messenger, that you accompany me on the set date. I would send an outfit or tailor, and expect you to appear at the given time, to be seen and not heard. That is not the case.”

She swallowed nervously, not daring to look at him, “So then, what do you propose?”

“That once you have finished your tea, I escort you to the Elfin town of Eldrasa, where a tailor is waiting. He is excellently skilled, and will give you a dress that is unique. It will not be in the Fae style, but the elves are quite well known for their grace and beauty. You will stand out in the crowd, radiant. If, you so choose.”

Farr of Eldrasa. It had to be. The legendary tailor who had sewn a gods tears into a pearl necklace, once. The Arbiter was going all-out to impress her, and to show her he wasn’t just doing this because she was Fae. He wanted someone to sit next to him at the wedding.

He was also showing that he knew more about her than she expected. She liked beautiful things, and had taken a liking to all things Elfin. She wasn’t sure whether to be surprised, impressed or creeped out. He was known for his spy networks, though he’d always denied they existed.

“You do not need to call me, Arbiter.”

She turned to look at him in surprise and he shrugged, “Call me, Janus, Lady Ashwen. And today, I am here to serve you, in whatever capacity you desire. My plans are flexible, for you.”

She picked up the peppermint leaf and nibbled on it, and then resisted stuffing it in her mouth, pretending to be considering his offer. Not that pretence meant much when he could read her thoughts as well as he seemed able to. At least he wasn’t as bad as Astrian. That woman always responded to what you thought before you could say it.

“I am not as skilled as Lady Astrian.” Janus smiled, “That woman is an astonishing prodigy. I have no idea how she copes with hearing the internal monologue of an entire realm.”

Ashwen stood up slowly, placing her tea regretfully on the saucer, “If we are to do this, and expect a possibility of more, Lord Arbiter, then you must show me you mean it.”

He smiled, standing up, “You request a date, m'lady?”

“I do.”

---



## Trei

Trei looked at the strange Fae, trying to work out what was going on inside her mind. Ever since she'd come back from speaking to Summer she had been different. Fidgety. When she was acting still and speaking calmly her wings were flapping nervously, furling and unfurling. The woman was clearly not a poker player, not with a tell like that.

He'd hurt her when he'd asked so directly, so he was guessing she either shouldn't or couldn't answer. But he didn't retract the question. His patience was wearing thin. Everyone walking around him, keeping secrets. This might be his second life, but it was still his. This marriage was being forced on him, and he needed to have some sort of say in it.

The Fae slowly sat down, looking down at the grass and running a hand through it, "Because I don't want to, sir."

Trei sat down next to her slowly, not speaking. He tried to soften his appearance, a difficult position when his body was little more than a mess of scars. He looked every part the bandit warrior at the moment.

She sighed, dropping her head further and letting her hair hide her face. "I want to run... Because I want to stay here. I'm scared. I'm terrified. Every time... I don't know how to explain this in human terms. I am beyond my knowledge. I am weak."

"You're not weak." Trei reassured her, "If you were, you'd run without talking to me. You're trying, which is more than a coward would be able to. I don't understand, true enough, but I want to."

Her head snapped up, blue eyes glaring at him through the strands of her blonde hair, "Stop that."

Trei cocked his head, "Help a dead guy out."

Her hands balled into fists and pressed into her knees, her wings stuck out behind her, "Being so nice. You always have to be nice. We ruined your life. Why do you have to be so... Kind!?"

So he hadn't insulted her then. She was going through some kind of internal conflict. Did she want to hate him? Is that what this was? She found herself unable to hate the dead human, despite the xenophobia innate to the Fae? "I am still angry, yeah. Doesn't mean I have to be a jerk to the people trying to help."

Astrian looked down quickly, and Trei winced as he saw wet spots appearing on the white threads that covered her knees. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Astrian screamed, and punched the dirt weakly, "I am not okay! I wish none of this had ever happened! I wish you didn't exist!"

Trei winced. So she did hate him, then.

"Idiot!" The Fae screamed, glaring up at him, "I don't hate you, that's the gods damned problem!"

He stared at her in shock, "Wait... You can-"

"Yes!" Astrian growled, "Your thoughts are like a damned town caller! You just broadcast them without giving a damn because you're mortal. I don't hate you, idiot. Summer is going to marry you. You belong to her. You are, according to our laws, her property. In every sense of the word. And I... I wish that wasn't the case."

Trei's brain ticked over the new information slowly. When the realisation dawned on him he felt like he'd swallowed a brick. He'd never had anyone agree to go on a date with him before, and now there was someone who was jealous that she couldn't have him. It didn't make any sense to him. No one had ever wanted him, and now there were two who wanted to own him? Did Summer want to own him? Or was she just doing this because of politics?

Astrian sighed heavily, looking at him with teary eyes, "You're an idiot. Summer loves you. She doesn't have a choice in it, Trei. Why do you think she attacked us earlier? She noticed I fell for you. She will always be there for you, and I am her sworn servant. You just... Go and make everything harder."

Trei gently shifted her hair to the side and out of her eyes, "Astrian. I will never do anything to hurt either of you, not intentionally. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

The woman glanced away from him, blushing. "Did you see anything?"

Trei frowned, "What?"

Astrian looked back at him in shock, "You didn't?"

"See what?" Trei asked, "I saw an upset Fae. If you're asking if I saw some emotion or-"

"No." Astrian looked at him seriously, returning to her upright posture, "Tell me. Do humans have visions?"

Trei shook his head, "The only humans who see things are mages, and the insane."

Astrian's eyes widened in shock, "Oh. Oh wow."

Trei cocked his head, "Did... Did you see something?"

"Yes." Astrian said, blushing again, "Uh... How do I explain this? When a Fae is... Bound to another... When they touch each other, they see their entwined future. That is how Lady Summer knew that she loved you, even as you were still returning to life."

Trei was surprised. He wasn't sure how to process that. Fae could see the future. Summer had fainted. She fell over when she took his hand, when he was just learning to walk. That must be why. She'd seen something, and it had taken all the strength out of her. "Astrian. How terrible is my future?"

The butler swallowed nervously, "I should not tell you. That is for the Lady Summer."

"You saw a future with me." Trei insisted, "Isn't it fair I know?"

Astrian sighed heavily, "It isn't fair to keep it from you. No. I saw you, in this garden. I saw moments of happiness, and of horror. I saw violence, and beauty. I saw this garden burn to cinders... And I saw you rebuilding it, laughing, with a child on your shoulders. Like all things, the future is not clearly either good or bad."

It was Trei's turn to blush, "We have a kid?"

"No." Astrian whispered, "The child looked like the Lady's."

"I don't understand, Astrian. If our future is together, why would you see Summer and I having a kid?"

The Fae looked at him with amusement, "You do not understand, ghou. There has been no Fae child born since we were first created."

Trei scratched his head, "Wait. What?"

“There are no new Fae.” Astrian shrugged, “We were created, and live and die, and are reborn from our own flesh. An endless cycle of rebirth, until it is interrupted by anything that breaks our connection to magic. However, we cannot get pregnant like mortals do. The Fae can only dwindle in numbers. However, it appears a half-Fae child will one day be born. That makes you the most important figure since Sumner.”

Trei rubbed his face with his hands, wincing as he felt several scars tear gently, “This is heavy.”

Astrian nodded, “Perhaps we should adjourn inside the cottage for a time. I will prepare you a meal.”

---

## Rendi

There were two of them in the log cabin style house that the queen insisted on living in. It always surprised him that the queen sort out this kind of life. That she lived in a cabin in a garden, far from civilisation. Isolated from her own people. She had enough magic she could live in a floating palace above a metropolis, but she didn't seek that out. She didn't crave the attention and worship of her people. Yet, despite her isolated way of life, her people felt free to come and go, and to ask her to intervene in the petty events of their life. Janus wouldn't have tolerated it.

The assassin laid in the crook of the tree silently, unmoving watch the occupants.

The blonde-haired Fae was humming quietly to herself as she cooked some of meat for the ghoul. It looked like it might have been obtained by hunting some of pests that inhabited the garden. Rodents of some kind, difficult to tell from just the flesh. The song she was humming caught his attention, and he almost found himself joining her, despite the needed precautions.

It was an ancient song, the kind that could easily get caught in your head, twisting round and round. It was about a young girl, living on the edge of the forest, who one day met a mortal human. Her mother warns her, and her father threatens her, but she runs away with the human, and they're happy for a time. But the man dies, and the girl is left alone in the human world, and they mistreat her. Eventually she starves to death, asking the gods to be reunited with her mortal. The gods don't hear her, because she is Fae. Her love is given an afterlife by the gods, but never forgets her.

A tragedy.

It seemed appropriate that she would bring it to mind, with the mortal here, and her feelings towards him as plain as day.

Rendi refocused as the mortal stood, trying to get Astrian to sit at the table as he limped towards the kitchen, trying to prepare a meal for her as well. It seemed the feelings between the two were at least somewhat mutual. That was curious, and potentially something they could exploit.

"Leaving would be the smart thing to do."

Rendi sighed, hearing the voice of the queen. He'd lasted longer than he'd expected. He turned and bowed, before vanishing with a swirl of black dust.

---

## Janus

Janus raised an eyebrow as he looked at the bill being proposed to the Council. “A stay? You already declared your intention, my lady. Is that not enough for this Council? Why do you now hesitate? Do you not love this mortal who you have declared to be your soulmate?”

The queen across from him bristled angrily, but spoke calmly, “Lady Astrian is assisting the mortal in rebinding his soul to his flesh. It would give her time to ensure he was longer rotting during the ceremony.”

Janus noticed the other Council members react immediately. It was true that a mortal showing such disgusting attributes would make it harder to ensure calm during the ceremony. However, Janus didn’t want calm during the ceremony. He wanted the people to doubt the queen. To consider whether or not she should be leading them. He wanted her authority to vanish. Making the mortal more palatable to the average person wasn’t particularly in his interests. Upon which, if the soul was rebound correctly, the mage would be more unlikely to find the mortal and go hunting for him.

The Arbiter shrugged, “I see no reason to consider a delay. It would be best to bind your union quickly, and then you can focus on the unusual demands that his state of existence present.”

“A vote.” A voice came tiredly, and Janus glanced over at the usually silent Luna, who was still lying on the table in her usual position, face hidden by her white hair. However, she apparently wasn’t asleep like usual. She was right, of course. No amount of debate would solve this problem, yet she was undercutting his ability to present an argument to the Council and gain further support. It was highly unusual for the princess to involve herself in the affairs of state.

The vote went round the room, tallying. It was an overwhelming majority. Unfortunately Janus hadn’t had the opportunity to present his argument and convince the others. A stay of exactly one day was granted. That was irritating.

As the Council members began to move out of the room, he crossed the floor to where the tired princess was lurching upright, “Can I have a moment of your time, Lady Luna?”

“No.” She replied, barely acknowledging his presence, “I interrupted a meeting to be here, and they’re going to be pissed.”

Janus raised an eyebrow, “Truly? With whom does the illustrious Luna meet? I did not believe you involved yourself in the management of your sister’s realm.”

She turned and glared at him, “Back off, Janus. Send your spies after me, and you’ll regret it. Pick a fight with me, and I’ll kill you. I am not in the mood for your games.”

That was Luna. Brash, rude, and forgetting of her place. However, she was correct. He would simply send a spy to determine with whom she would be meeting. He bowed and waved a hand, “I will seek you at a later date.”

The Fae angrily turned and moved through the wall of reality.

Janus wondered what it was exactly that she was plotting, along with her sister. The two had to be cooperating in some misguided attempt to undermine him. He wondered what had spurred Luna into supporting the queen, and if he could use it to make her regret her action.

---

## Luna

Luna arrived in the garden again, next to a fountain, and dropped to her knees, holding up her hands. “Apologies, the Council was called to session.”

A pink-haired woman with strange ears and stranger black orbs of eyes glared down at her, “Does the Council bind reality together? Does their will dictate the destiny of souls? What call do they have upon you that causes you to insult me?”

Luna winced, “I meant no offence.”

The pink haired woman tossed her head, and turned, making an annoyed sound. “Make your argument for your offensive presence, low creature.”

Luna sighed, “I am here on behalf of my queen. She deals with a crisis, her reality was ruptured by a mortal. She has sent me to beg you for information about one.”

The creature waved a hand tiredly, “Information? Why should I grant knowledge of the timestream to your queen? She has not visited us in some time, and now she sends a lackey. You stink of weakness, puny Fae.”

“Yes.” Luna growled, nearly losing her temper, “I stink of a mortal. I have imprinted on him, as did my queen, and another. How is this possible?”

The woman went very still and turned slowly, “Three? Three Fae are fated for the same creature?”

“Trei. A human who died.” Luna stated, looking at the Fate in desperation, “How is it possible?”

“Oh.” The woman whispered, her black eyes seemingly softening, and she crouched, taking Luna’s hands gently, “You need make no supplication to me. I see your desperation, and I feel it also.”

Luna looked at the omnipotent creature in confusion, “Why have the Fates bound me to one I cannot have?”

“It was not intended.” The woman replied, “It is... My fault. I was following a mortal, who I like to plague. A human queen, with vast resources. I cursed with immortality, and the creature has truly embraced the curse as a blessing. She is highly adaptable. No matter what I do to her, she does not fail or lose hope.”

Luna frowned, “A mage. The mage who killed Trei?”

“Yes.” The woman nodded, “I... I saw him when the mage went to visit him for some tedious reason I can’t recall. I saw his kindness, and his boyish stupidity. I was... Enraptured.”

Luna blinked in surprise, “I was not aware that the Fates could feel attraction.”

The woman shrugged, “Of course we can. I however, was selfish. I attempted to bind his fate to my own. During this process, however, the mortal was killed, an action taken by one of my sisters to... Keep me rooted in my responsibilities.”

Luna shook her head, “I don’t understand.”

“His fate became... Unbound from the rest of reality.” The Fate said slowly, “Instead of fating the crossing of his path with mine, I made it so that he can determine his own destiny. So that his heart controls his own fate. He will be inevitably granted everything that his heart desires. My own fate is bound to his, as is the fate of everyone who crosses his path. To put it as simply as I can, he

is now like unto a Fate. He possesses the same power and abilities as my sisters and I do. He has not the experience or knowledge to control it, but he has it all the same.”

Luna swallowed nervously, “So... He isn’t really my soulmate then? Its just because I met him?”

The Fate laughed, “No. Your fate is bound to his, because he thought you were cute. You are his soulmate. But he may not choose you. All four of us are his soulmate... But he has the power to choose which of us will ultimately remain his soulmate.”

Luna felt like she’d been stabbed. Trei was her future, but she might not be his. And she’d have to compete with a Fate and her sister.

“Oh.”

---

## Janus

Janus' head spun as a burst of flames filled the room. The assassin patted themselves out and glared at him, "Lady Luna is in a meeting with the Fates, sir."

He could hear the anger in the man's voice, and he couldn't really blame them. That the Fates had allowed the man to live was surprising. However, he was replaceable, as were all under the lord's care. Best not to let the servants get ideas about what was reasonable and what was not.

"I see."

The assassin sighed, "I have a message, from our first. He is currently in the human realm, tracking the mage for you. Apparently she tore a hole in the queen's realm this morning. It appears she is also besotted with this dead mortal."

Janus frowned. That was surprising. His alarms hadn't gone off. "Do you know how this incursion went unnoticed?"

"No, sir." The man replied, "It was noticed by the inhabitants of the realm, but did not trigger any proximity warnings that we can determine."

That was concerning. It meant the mortal had ripped open a hole into a realm without having to tunnel between the human world and the Faen realms. A new pathway, one Janus hadn't discovered, had been used. He thought he'd found them all a long time ago. "Inform the first that this mage is too much of a danger. Execute her."

The man nodded, and then faded into the shadows.

Janus turned and looked at his fire. It would have been the easiest solution to his problems, but he had other ways and opportunities yet. Why had Summer sent Luna to the Fates? Was she having doubts about the mortal? No one would be able to tell him. The Fates could not be spied on, and they couldn't be bribed or charmed, and not even the Arbiter could choose to visit them without significant cause. Only the Queen could seek them out of her own volition, or send someone on her behalf.

That was unfortunate. He disliked not knowing.

---



## Alphege

The elf leaned wearily on the spear, feeling her throat constricting tighter and tighter, unable to breathe. The black lines tracing a fractal pattern across her skin had grown and spread, and she knew it wouldn't be long now. Her people were already anxious, with the queen calling her repeatedly, despite the warnings that using magic was increasing the rate at which the sickness was invading her.

She couldn't blame them for being worried, she was. She did not have the magical knowledge necessary to even slow the infection, let alone stop or cure it. Her people were going to die, all because of a stupid Fae that decided she needed a challenge. To be tested.

The air rippled, and a human female emerged. Her hair was a beautiful golden colour, bundled up into a bun atop her head. The scorching blue eyes beneath however seemed to drink in the entire environment, with a hunger that disturbed Alphege. This was a woman who saw the entire world as building blocks that she could play with. A creature who did not understand beauty, nor care for it.

"You appear to be the only one still standing." The mage yawned, and walked over, "The Guardians always were stubborn. This virus should have already killed you."

Alphege swallowed painfully, and rasped, "Can you help us?"

"Of course." The mage yawned again, "It is virulent, but simple. This is just an effective thing. But if I do help you, you will owe me, elf. You will swear an oath to aid me in a mission, of a kind. I won't tell you the nature, or when I will summon you. These are the terms. Do you accept?"

No elf can break an oath once given. It wasn't just revolting to them, it was lethal. An oathbreaker broke their own soul. It was akin to suicide. To give an oath, to a human from a violent region, with a history of violence and manipulation, was beyond dangerous. This creature would try and force her to become a weapon, to serve her as a brilliant and destructive force against her enemies, whoever they may be.

"I will not... Endanger... My world... Or people." She struggled, gasping for air.

The mage considered, "Fair enough. I accept. Give me your hand."

Alphege held out her hand weakly and the mage grabbed it roughly, and drew a small runed dagger and slashed her palm. Alphege's eyes watered, and she saw the black blood bubbling up from her hand. The mage winced and chewed her cheek for a moment, "I need to see how far this has spread. Take off your clothes."

The elf went bright red, staring in surprise.

"I'm serious. Take them off." The mage demanded, and Alphege sullenly pulled her shirt off before dropping it to the ground. If it wasn't for the fever she would feel blisteringly cold. She dropped her skirt, and underwear and glared at the mage.

The blonde paced around her slowly, looking at the spread of the fractal patterns and paused behind her, "Ah. Here we go. This will be... Uncomfortable."

Alphege was already uncomfortable. Modesty was a prized concept in her society.

She gasped airlessly as the knife slammed into the small of her back, severing her spine. She fell forwards, and the mage caught her easily, laying her down slowly, "Now, I know you can't move, but make sure you don't try."

Pain flowed through her like a river. She found herself outside the world, beyond it. Her senses were stripped away until all that was left was a white void and the ringing in her ears. She found it

oddly peaceful, as if she were being welcomed into the embrace, and into the folds of death. She was free of the world she had always known, a world that had grown up whilst she had become more and more disenfranchised with it. She had seen species rise and fall in dominance. She had witnessed the creation of mankind, and how with every cycle of the sun they become more and more violent, targeting each other with crimes that would cause a purge amongst her own kind.

She had seen the revival, and the rise of the paladins, a spark of hope in a bleak and tired world. And then she had watched as the king's claimed these holy warriors for their own and snuffed out the hope of a race not filled with prejudice, rage and destruction. Mankind was a pox upon the world, a virus that would eventually destroy itself.

She had seen Sumner sacrifice her life, so that a new race might be born, one that might hold the values of the original, from before the fracturing, from before man had attempted to steal the power of the gods. The Fae were a childish people. Endlessly reborn, endlessly relearning the same lessons, and making the same mistakes. They prided themselves on arrogance and xenophobia. They were a disgrace, a failure. A waste of talent, and beauty.

She had seen the human mage, Danren. A hopeful and idealistic child, who took a hold of the dead of humanity and Elfin kind, and tried to forge the original kind anew. In his failure he created the mindless goblin race, a plague that destroys everyone and everything. Their first victim was Danren himself. He died screaming as they ate him alive.

She had seen the birth of the orks, by the human mage who distorted and corrupted himself, taking the name Drak'tur. He created monsters, and became one, so that he might have a chance at succeeding where his ancestors had failed. He set out to destroy the gods. His descendants might one day prove up to the task. They were a violent and insane race. Priding themselves on pain and torture. Revelling in death, and welcoming it when it came for them. They were without mercy. Their souls were as ugly as their outward appearance.

Sensation came back with a fiery storm, and Alphege cried out, tears springing from her eyes unbidden.

She heard the mage speak quietly from above her, "Sorry about that. I needed you to experience it. We're done, at least with you."

Alphege's hands curled into fists and she sat up slowly, glaring at the human in front of her, no different than any of her ancestors who had corrupted the world, pushing it ever closer to the bitter end. "What was that, mortal?"

"Mortality." She sighed, "That's what the virus seeks. Death. So... I gave you a near death experience. Not quite sure how it would be for you, being a deathless elf and all, but that experience needed to be created. You're cured, but now we have to pass on the cure."

Alphege screwed up her nose and she sat up slowly on her knees, "You wish to force the curse of mortality onto all my people. The knowledge that things end. A knowledge that forces you to see how much evil has truly happened in this world."

The mage shrugged, "Maybe it's time your people realised they're a part of this world."

Alphege pushed herself upright with her spear, "That is not acceptable to me, mage. I thank you for your help. I am bound by my oath. Yet, there is another way to cure my people, and I take that option."

The mage paused, "You can't be serious. If you focus all of that on yourself... You won't be an elf anymore. The trauma of experiencing death over and over, for every life connected to your

sacred tree... It can't be done. You won't survive it. You'll become a mere shadow of yourself."

"I am the Guardian." She replied, "I take that option."

The mage sighed with frustration and then sat down, "If you're going to be this stupid, then I'll watch. When you start to die, I will try and keep your mind intact. I won't have my investment in you wasted. It isn't like taking you close to the edge of death and back was easy."

Alphege spun the spear in her hand, focusing.

The blade slammed into Yggdrasil, linking her to it, and to all life flowing through it and from it.

---

## Summer

Summer walked into the kitchen slowly, her heart tangled up in knots. She knew what she had to do, and to be honest with herself, she'd waited too long. It was cruel. That didn't mean that she wasn't having palpitations at the mere thought.

She felt her ears flatten against her head and her wings spread as she saw Astrian humming to herself in front of the fireplace, with Trei sitting beside her, warming his hands. Flashes of violent thoughts ran through her mind about putting the Fae through a meatgrinder. She screwed up her face with determination, and settled her outward appearance.

Summer walked over slowly, sitting down next to Trei and fighting the urge to wrap herself around him. He looked over at her in surprise, "Summer. I thought you were dealing with a crisis of some sort?"

She stopped herself from glaring at Astrian, but her aura still changed colour quickly enough the butler flinched. "I am, but... It can wait."

Trei raised an eyebrow, "A crisis? Wait?"

Summer shrugged, "There's something more important I should do. That I should have done a long time ago, and I... I still don't know how to explain."

Astrian stood and curtsied, "I will leave the two of you."

"Stay." Summer instructed, "You're every bit a part of this, Astrian."

Trei glanced between them, "How is that?"

"Just... Give me a moment." Summer growled and then sighed, "To start at the beginning... I've met the mage who killed you, Trei."

He winced, "How is she?"

"Upset." Summer said sadly, "Apparently, you made an impression. She nearly ripped my realm in half trying to find you. To try and save you."

Trei sighed, looking down, "I'm sorry."

"So is she." Summer replied, wanting to stroke his face, "She loves you, Trei. Even now."

He looked up in confusion, "What? What is going on? People falling for me after I'm dead but not before?"

"The Fates." Summer replied, "They're... A series of powerful creatures. Older than the gods. One of them, became your first love. Unfortunately, she screwed up and now... Now you've got her power."

Trei went bolt upright, "What?"

Summer shrugged, "You're now a focal point of power in the universe. And that is why a fluke accident caused me to resurrect you. The universe wasn't willing to let you go."

Astrian frowned, "This is news, my Lady. When did the Lady Luna speak to you?"

"Right before I came here." Summer smiled weakly, "Trei... Fae don't fall in love. We imprint. Once imprinted, we never fall for anyone else ever again... It seems that your new power is letting you choose whoever you want. So far as I know, every Fae you've met since your resurrection, has fallen for you."

He rubbed his face, "Shoot. So I'm cursed then. I'm hurting all of you."

Summer shrugged, "I have first dibs, and authority the others don't. So they're not about to try anything."

Trei glanced at her with a half smile, "You're not angry at me."

"No." Summer shook her head, "I'm angry at myself for not telling you straight away. I'm angry that I ran from you. . . I don't care if this is some cosmic mistake playing out, I want you. I want you to be mine. . . But I won't force you. If I care for you at all. . . I have to let the choice be yours."

She turned away so he wouldn't see the tears running down her face openly, "And then, there's the other thing I kept from you. Why politics demanded we get married. Why the wedding has to be some stupid big event rather than us running away to a tiny cottage together like I really want to. . . I. . . I. . ."

Astrian spoke quietly, "The Lady Summer is our queen, Trei."

She felt his hand grip her shoulder and squeeze softly, "You didn't want me to see you as a queen, did you? You wanted me to see you. . . So that if I cared, I'd fall for you, and not the title."

Summer nodded silently.

He gripped her chin, turning her face, "Summer, I don't care if you're queen. You're kind. You're beautiful. I want to give us a chance. . . But it's hard to fall for someone who isn't here. You don't need to run from me."

"I do need to keep the world running, though." Summer said bitterly, "I'm still patching the hole Vastras made when she tried to find you."

Trei flinched, "Vastras? The mage was Queen Vastras? Seriously?"

Summer glared, "Yes. And she still wants you too. So I've got two Fae, a Fate and another Queen all vying for you."

Trei laughed softly, trying to hide his amusement, and Summer ground her fangs together. He shrugged, "Sorry. You're really cute when you're jealous."

The queen's mind hated her heart. Why did he have to be so good at disarming her? He hadn't chosen her yet! She shouldn't feel like she was floating just because he was willing to compliment her over something so small. All he'd done was say that she was cute. It wasn't an undying vow of love.

Astrian shot to her feet, turning around, and Trei looked at her in concern, "Oh shoot. Sorry, Astrian."

The butler didn't say anything, but her aura was clear. She was crying, trying to control herself. Summer buried her feelings of glee at her rival's plight, and spoke quietly, "Astrian. It's okay. You don't need to hide those feelings. We're all in this together."

Trei winced, "So. . . Lady Luna is the other one?"

"My sister, yes." Summer said, with just a hint of warning at the edge of her tone. The ghoul looked over at her, "Sisters. Well. This isn't going to be pleasant is it?"

Summer shrugged, "We all do what we can. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Where is Lady Luna?" Astrian asked timidly, still obviously fighting her tears.

Summer felt her cheeks redden, "We may have had a conversation."

Trei rolled his black eyes, "You guys fought."

“Yes.” Summer replied and shrugged, “And Luna stormed off, after reminding me she saw you naked.”

It was Trei’s turn to blush, “It wasn’t like that! And I wasn’t naked!”

She crossed her arms, trying to feel unconcerned about the size of her chest, “She’s seen more than I have.”

The ghoul looked back and forth between the Fae, obviously beginning to panic. Summer sighed, and touched his shoulder. She ignored the explosion of images, smells and sounds, “Sorry.”

Trei seemed to relax somewhat, but she could still feel the muscles knotted up, “I really have no idea what I’m doing.”

She laughed, playfully shoving him, “And you think we do? Imprinting is a once in a lifetime thing.”

He turned and looked at her, his cold eyes chilling a part of her soul, and letting another part take flight, “How does it feel to have something new for the first time in... How long?”

“Subtle.” Summer glared, “Look, if you want my age... I don’t really know, honestly. This lifetime, I’m somewhere around three hundred. Probably a bit more. As for since creation... I gave up counting generations ago. Somewhere north of a thousand.”

Trei stared at her in utter disbelief, “Say what?”

Summer shrugged, “I’m old enough to remember humans being created. How does that sound?”

Astrian laughed nearby, unable to contain her humour at Trei’s expression, “I’m one of the younger Fae, sir, and I can remember the gods giving birth to your race.”

“I... I’m twenty three years old.” Trei stumbled out, staring at Summer, “How do I not look like a child to you?”

“Because you’re not.” Summer replied easily and shrugged, “Look, I turn into a child every time I die. I go through the same maturation process, over and over. A child is a developmental stage. You’ve left it. The fact that our ages have nothing to do with our development is different. If someone tried to kiss a toddler Fae, they would still have their ass handed to them. I would expect a hundred year old to be equivalent to a human teenager, but they may have been different in their last lifetime. People are all different. Physical age doesn’t have a lot to do with mental age.”

Trei nodded slowly, “If I didn’t die... You could never have spent your lifetime with me, could you?”

“I still can’t.” Summer replied, feeling her heart ache, “I will outlive the human race, Trei. Though you’re dead, your body is still deteriorating. You can offset it with some of the magic Astrian has been teaching you, but in the end you have a mortal body. There is a limit to how many times you can renew it. There is a limit to how long your soul can bind to it. You might live with it for a million years, which may well feel eternal to a mortal... But I am eternal. I will still be alive when the stars burn out and the fundamentals of reality fall to dust. I will outlive the human realm’s existence.”

Trei looked down sadly, “You’ll all outlive me.”

“No, Trei.” Astrian replied, sitting down slowly in front of him on the ground, and looking up at his face, “The Lady Summer will outlive you, but I might not. Lady Luna might not. We are not eternal, we are Fae. There is a limit, though a preposterous one, placed upon our existence.”

He shook his head, "I don't understand."

"I was the first Fae created." Summer said slowly, sadly, "I am the template that all Fae were created from, but they aren't perfect copies. They have flaws that will eventually lead to their deaths, though as of yet no Fae has died of old age. They've been reincarnated, but not faultlessly. Each reincarnation causes... Errors... To appear in the fabric that comprises the magical matrix that binds the soul and life together to the flesh. That's not the case for me."

Astrian smiled sadly, "The Lady, so long as she is not murdered, will not only be the first Fae, but the last. That is her destiny."

Trei turned to her, looking with some sort of new appreciation, "That must be hard. Knowing you'll outlive everyone you meet."

Summer shrugged, "There's some I'd happily outlive."

"Don't do that." Trei growled, "Don't hide behind humour or distraction. Please. You were being honest."

Summer ran a hand through her hair, "Sometimes. It hasn't happened yet, Trei, ever. For the most part, I'm too busy to think about the far flung existential future. Just stopping everyone from killing each other is hard enough at times. We're on the verge of war, for the first time, right now. The Arbiter was supposed to be a role for someone to break the tie when the Council is voting, and then they were supposed to be a special Fae who could train military for the sole purpose of protecting us... And now Janus has spies everywhere, and we all know it, and can't stop him. He's been repossessing realms from those of us who can create them. We create worlds, and he rips part out of it out and adds it to his own - he's capable of creating his own, but instead of going to the effort... I don't even know why he's doing it. To unbalance us? To remind people not to oppose him?"

Trei sighed heavily, "The verge of war... And now you're marrying a dead mortal... Who keeps having Fae imprint on him... I'm a powder keg."

Summer nodded hesitantly, "Unfortunately. I need to know why and how people are imprinting on you. If it's just the five of us, then we can probably work it out. But if you stand in front of a public wedding and every female Fae imprints on you, we're going to have a problem."

"It isn't."

Summer blinked, "How are you so sure?"

"My suit." Trei shrugged, "I'm sure you thought the tailor and his assistants were all male, but one of them wasn't."

Summer shrugged, "Oh. Talin. She's pretty much a he. He is attracted to females. Maybe there needs to be some attraction there... On your part as well. You are the source of it all, in the end."

Trei absorbed the information slowly, "Oh. Fae have moved beyond that kind of persecution, then, I guess. Humans... Haven't. A hanging offence."

"Gods." Astrian said screwing up her nose, "What would they do to me?"

Trei raised an eyebrow, "You? I thought you..."

Astrian rolled her eyes, "I may have imprinted on you, mortal, but that doesn't mean you're the only one I've ever been attracted to."

Summer elbowed him gently, “Astrian became my servant a few lifetimes ago, Trei, because she’s my friend. But that wasn’t always the case. We dated once.”

“For two hundred years or so.” Astrian whispered, “Things became awkward when I was reborn, but we managed to form a friendship. A friendship that has survived many lifetimes.”

Trei shook his head, and then glanced at the fire, “Uh, Astrian? Can you rescue that?”

Summer flicked her wrist, and the flames vanished with a puff of steam, quickly replaced by fog as the fireplace grew cold. The butler removed the charred meat slowly, and then moved towards the table, “I will prepare it.”

Summer put an arm around Trei, dropping her head onto his shoulder and closing her eyes. “I’m sorry... For everything I’ve put you through... Everything I’m making you do... For not telling you...”

She felt his head lean onto hers, “I don’t hate you, Summer.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, “You should.”

He didn’t answer, his breathing changing pace, and she wondered what kind of thoughts were racing around inside that skull of his. Astrian would know. Even Luna might pick up on them, but for her, he was a blank slate. She liked it. Liked knowing he was his own person, that he wasn’t constantly intimidated by her presence or trying to work out how to stab her in the back. He just was.

---



## Luna

Luna looked at the silver cuffs around her wrists and the smoke as she burned.

The man in the shadows spoke quietly, "Why did you visit them?"

She shrugged, "Well, I've been having some problems with my love life and thought they could give me a hint or two."

The princess winced, coughing as the truth spell tightened around her aura, trying to strangle her as the man increased the flow of mana. "There is no need for this, simply tell me what I need to know."

"I did." Luna hissed through her teeth, feeling a muscle in her cheek spasming. "I spoke with F'rir. About a boy I can't get out of my head, but he hasn't even noticed me."

The shadow laughed softly, "You expect me to believe you like the mortal? When your sister has imprinted upon him?"

"She always takes what I want." Luna hissed, spitting a ball of blood to the side, and then her eyes flashed silver as she looked into the darkness, and revealed the Fae hiding there. His face was protected by a series of spells, but the man shifted uncomfortably at her gaze.

"Why did they accept you, and not attack?"

Luna laughed, "Attack? Of course they did. They damn well tortured me, and a good sight better than you are. I had to live out my destiny. My death, over and over. Better than your torture. Because I know it will happen. My inevitable end."

"What end is that?"

The princess shook her head, "No, bastard. That one is mine and mine alone."

The spell twisted around her dug itself into her nervous system and ignited. It attempted to force her to speak, burrowing through her brain's matrices and keeping the pathways for pain open, adapting them whenever her brain adapted to the pain, keeping her in horrifying screaming agony until her sense of reality began to slip away. She felt the spell pull back slowly, and she breathed heavily, blood dripping from her mouth onto the ground.

"You are quite resilient." The man spoke, impressed, "Few Fae are able to resist speaking the truth when presented with the Derran Spellvirus. It is capable of killing you, but it is a time-consuming process. Yet, I do believe you would be able to survive it to the end."

Luna didn't respond, her brain sluggishly trying to find itself in the storm of agony that had just been thrust upon it. Her own thoughts seemed to spiral away before she could finish them. It was just so hard to concentrate. Light. A pinprick of light inside her head.

The princess snapped upright, hissing angrily, her wings unfurling and breaking the chains holding them, "Get out of my head!"

The man was tossed backwards in the shadows as the spell fractured, splintering into dozens of streams of haphazard magic. He held his face, which was smoking and raised a hand towards her, "That was a mistake, Luna. Attacking your interrogator isn't a wise choice."

Luna shook her head, "You're the idiot, Rendi. For attacking a Council member, even if it was on the direct order of the Arbiter. I am the Guardian of the Shrine."

Her torturer looked at her in surprise, unsure how she knew who he was. She could see him checking his glamour spells and other protections were still in place, and she shrugged, breaking

the cuffs around her wrists, before standing and stretching, arms overhead. “I’ve let you have your amusement. I’ve answered a few of your questions.”

Rendi braced, moving into a fighting position, “My orders were specific.”

“I am the Crown Princess.” Luna glared, “Heir to the throne. Do you really think torturing me is one of those ambiguous parts of our laws? You have committed treason. Even the Arbiter can’t protect you from that.”

The man was surrounded in black clouds of dust, and Luna rolled her eyes and twitched her hand. The magic dust dropped to the floor inert, “I am also the Shadow Knight of the Evening Realms. Can you explain to me what that means, Rendi?”

He looked at her in horror as all his protection spells slowly dissolved, “Black magic. It comes from you.”

“That’s right.” Luna growled, bearing her fangs, “I am the source of all darkness. As much as my sister is the light of the world, I am her opposite. You have used my magic all your lives. You have served the Arbiter as his first, executing our own, and torturing those under our care. The Arbiter protected you, as is his right, until now. Janus has overstepped.”

Rendi went to move his wrist and Luna glared, freezing him to the spot, “Suicide is not an option, boy. You don’t get to escape by ceasing your own existence. You have claimed my magic as yours all your lives. I claim that debt. You are now my slave. Your soul can no longer take an action that is contrary to my interests. You are mine.”

The assassin dropped to one knee, holding his hands out, “I am yours.”

She felt a twinge of guilt at that, but it was the only way she knew of to stop Janus. The man would have taken precautions, ones she couldn’t anticipate. But not this. No one could stop this kind of debt. His soul really was bound to hers and her will. He would seek to do what she wanted. He could no longer think of opposing her or her will. Rendi was hers, mind, body and soul.

“Call the Council.” She whispered, wiping blood from her mouth with her sleeve.

---

## Summer

The emergency session of the Council kicked into high gear. Summer arrived, yanked from Trei's side by the magic of the summons.

She glared around the room as the other councillors popped into existence, one by one. None of them seemed to know why they were there, or who had summoned them. All of them seemed surprised, except for Janus.

He looked calm, but unhappy. A permanent attitude. Had he summoned the Council? Or was he just knowledgeable thanks to his damned spy network? What was the man playing at?

Doubt erased itself from her mind and was replaced with horror as a Fae appeared in the centre of the room. Luna stood there, weakly. Her wrists were burned, her face was bloodied and bruised. Her wings didn't sparkle, and showed marks where they had been bound.

Summer stood up slowly, staring, "Luna..."

The crown princess held up a hand, "My Queen. Please, sit, so I can say my piece."

The Council chambers were silent, watching the woman in quiet apprehension. Luna spread her hands, "Councillors, I was just taken captive. I was tortured, whilst one sought information on a recent meeting between myself and the Fates. The one who attacked me, bound me, and cast the Derran Spellvirus on me was defeated, but they acted on the behest of the Arbiter."

Summer was impressed. Even this beat up her sister knew what she was doing. Every phrase was an unambiguous crime.

Janus stood up, "I object. Where is your evidence that I would dare to attack the heir to the Evening Realms?"

Summer glared at him, "Heir to the Faen Realms, Arbiter. Not just the Evening Realms."

The councillor looked off-balance at her coldness, and that the others weren't leaping to his defence. He sat down slowly, and Luna nodded, "You have the right, Arbiter, to ask that this evidence is heard."

Summer felt her heart accelerate. Evidence. Her sister had evidence against Janus.

"Boy." Luna growled, and the room hissed as a man in black appeared next to her. An assassin, using dark magic. A tool of Janus', but not one any of them had ever been able to prove he actually used. It was an offensive thought to think they existed. A Fae dedicated to the permanent destruction of another Fae.

The man bowed his head, "I am Rendi, and I have served the Arbiter, Janus, for six hundred and twenty three lifetimes, as a tool of destruction."

Janus stared in shock, "If... If this is true, Rendi, why are you here and speaking against one you have served for so long? Surely such loyalty is doubted the moment you appear to question it?"

Rendi shrugged, "I am no longer yours, Arbiter. This change in loyalty is explained simply. My lady?"

Luna grinned, glaring at Janus, "I am the Shadow Knight of the Evening Realms, Arbiter. For how long have your servants dedicated themselves to the study of my magic? It belongs to me, and as of this moment, so do they."

Summer swallowed. Her sister was utilising something that was more than a touch taboo. Stealing the souls of Fae, twisting them into her servants. This kind of slavery had been wiped out

before the human race had even been born. It was anathema.

Luna shrugged, “I had no choice. The Arbiter attacked me. I was tortured. I am willing to release these men and women from my command, Arbiter, but not before you answer to the crimes you have committed. All of those who are now mine will answer under any requirement that might be made by the Council. The truth will be made plain.”

Janus looked up at Luna with unbridled hatred, “You bitch.”

Summer launched to her feet, “Take the Arbiter into custody.”

Janus scoffed as a Fae moved towards him, and vanished, stepping through reality with a magic that Summer had never seen. So he had kept some secrets to himself, then. She turned and looked at the rest of the Council, “Issue an arrest warrant for the Arbiter. I also move that we seize his realms until the trial has completed.”

The vote was instant and unanimous.

However, Summer felt her heart beating. Janus was gone. She wasn’t entirely sure they could stop whatever he was planning. He wasn’t a weak Fae, and he knew every route in and out of the realms. All they’d done just now was make him desperate... Or played into his hands, if this was his intent when he ordered her sister’s torture.

Luna swayed slightly, and Rendi caught her. “Councillors, if that is all, I believe my mistress has been through an ordeal. I know it to be true, by my own hand. Allow me to make some small penance by caring for her now.”

Summer really didn’t like the way he was talking. But, he was right. She turned to the others, and then turned back, “Luna. You must be protected. Walk the hidden line, and walk it not alone.”

Her sister nodded tiredly, and then the two vanished.

Summer clenched her fists, “Now, councillors, if you’ll excuse me, I now have to explain this to my future husband.”

---

## Ashwen

Ashwen was still sitting at the table. The other councillors were circling, yelling at each other. Arguing over what they had just seen. Taking sides, complaining that the queen was already overstepping, or trying to defend Janus torturing the heir to the throne.

She was still.

He was a monster. A demon in Faen form. How could the man who had smiled so easily... How could he be like this? He hadn't even tried to hide it. He'd called her a bitch and left. He had tortured another Fae! From what she had seen, Janus had actually tortured a Fae. Taken her to the brink of despair. Through pain and violence.

Ashwen balled up her fists as tears began to flow down her face.

How could the man who had made her tea so casually condone a sin against what it meant to be Fae? How could he claim to be a patriot when he treated his own kind as something less than even livestock? Did he see them all as nothing more than mortals? Did she ever mean anything to him? Or was she just another conquest for him. A convenient excuse to test his skills of manipulation?

Her fists slammed on the table, and the room went silent, turning towards her, and Ashwen growled, her fangs grinding together, "The Queen has spoken. The evidence is unambiguous. The arrest of the Arbiter has been issued. What are you all still doing here!?"

Fae muttered apologies and then began blinking out of existence, one by one. Apparently she'd hit a nerve.

She hoped she had. She was angry.

Beyond angry.

She had been used, and abused, by nothing less than a monster.

She hadn't just kissed the man. She'd shared herself with him. Began thinking of herself as his. She boiled with rage as she remembered his voice as he lay above her. He'd corrupted her. Stained her. She'd never be free of this. He was a vile creature, and she would dedicate her life to his destruction. No matter what it would take.

---

## Claven

The red-eyed Fae shifted to her realm quickly. She arrived and breathed heavily as she looked at the farmland the distant creaking waterwheel. It looked like it was jammed, again.

She wasn't sure what to make of Lady Ashwen's outburst. She was right, in part. The queen had issued her orders. Standing around debating them wouldn't change them. The Arbiter had undoubtedly broken the laws. He'd broken taboos. Yet, despite all that, he was one of the greatest Faen patriots there was. Claven had a tough time believing that he acted without undue cause.

The queen marrying an undead monster that should have been put out of its misery a long time ago was not undue cause, not in her mind.

Claven walked towards the waterwheel slowly, hands drifting over the tops of the wheat stalks as she walked, breathing in the cold country air. Overhead the sun was shining, streaming down and rejuvenating her as it struck her skin, splitting apart and forming the red dust that fell from her so easily as she moved. She wasn't a powerful Fae, far from it. She didn't have the gift for magic, not really. She had enough to get by, but little enough that most people thought of her as disabled.

She smiled. She had a realm. A small one, but still. An entire realm came under her purview, due mostly to her standing as the historian of the council. She could transplant memories, and carry them. So when the Arbiter acted out in a way that seemed surprising and new to everyone else... She could see it coming. He had been moving in this direction for a very long time. Seizing power, seizing assets. Janus had been preparing for something. Something new. He could see a threat that the council had been blind to, intentionally or not. All he had done was prepare to fight the threat.

She couldn't fault him for that.

Nor could she fault him for doing what no one else was willing to do. That was what made someone a hero or a villain. The willingness to act, even when the world stands still. When nobody else will stand up and actually do something. The only difference between the two tropes was their success. The villain always fails, in the end. History repaints them in a worse and worse light, and relegate them to the memories of the historian. The hero always triumphs. History is rewritten to benefit the victor. The lessons of the past are repeated. Over and over again.

Nothing new was ever truly new. Someone had always made the mistake before. No one was every truly willing to learn from their mistakes.

That was the difference she saw between Arbiter and Queen. He adapted as the worlds moved on, always seeking to fight and protect what was his. Whereas the queen was a relic of a bygone era. Her title an afixation caused simply because of her connection to the creator of the Fae. Did that really matter? It wasn't like the queen was the creator, not really. She was a different person, granted incredible power. She was nothing more than a living weapon. A weapon of mass destruction. Mass genocide. She had her own fair share of sins attributed to her. Elfkind would never forget what the queen had wrought upon them. Gardia.

Claven ground her teeth.

For now, she had no choice but to follow her queen. That was law. But it was also a mistake, and not one she intended to keep repeating forever.

"Madam Claven!"

She smiled, waving tiredly, "Alfre. Wheel stuck, again?"

The young Fae dropped to the ground in front of her, rubbing his grease-stained hands on his

overalls, "Aye. She might have finally kicked the bucket, from what I can see. Seems that kink in the axle has moved again. Gone beyond what the wheel can strain against."

Claven nodded and floated upwards, looking at where Luna had punched Hero those generations ago. Where she had attempted to kill a mortal, ignoring all the death and destruction they were causing around them. The princess was a weapon, as well. That wasn't a secret. The Guardian of the Shrine. She was a truly terrifying individual.

She rubbed her hands together, gathering her dust. She didn't have much to spare, and the people living under her had less. The realm reflected the one who made it, who nurtured it. So machinery like this was vital. If this stopped working again they would have to water the fields by bucket brigades, like they had in the last summer. She was hoping that wouldn't be necessary, that this would be easier than Alfre was thinking. That would be a first.

She could see that the axle had been caught on the edge of one of the gears, shearing off teeth, and now the mechanism didn't have enough to make a full revolution. She could potentially create a new gear, though it would probably make her spent from several days of effort. She'd spent all her magic on the shadow creatures protecting the fields, recently. She didn't really feel like getting another magical hangover. However, if she just made a new gear then the axle would get caught again. "Toss me up the hammer."

Alfre grunted and a sledgehammer slid through the air, pausing about to fall as it reached her. Claven grabbed it, wincing. It was heavier than she remembered. Or she was more tired. One or the other.

She tapped the axle lightly and it turned. She sighed and whispered a spell, flinching as she felt the exhaustion nearly knock her out of the sky. She froze the axle in place, and then she flew. She dropped towards the ground and shot into the air, bringing the hammer down with all the strength she dared. As she hit she felt the thing jar her, and the hammer was knocked flying out of her hands.

She winced as she fell her dust giving out, and dropped out of the sky. She felt Alfre catch her a moment before the dirt, and the two tumbled for a moment. The mechanic was on his hands, leaning over her. She could see the expression he was trying to hide in his eyes. He'd always liked her. But he'd also learned to respect that she had never felt the same.

He stood up awkwardly, glancing over, "Well, seems you shifted it a bit. It might do."

Claven yawned, sitting up on her elbows, "I still need to replace the gear."

"I've been thinking on that." Alfre replied, "I reckon if you can get me some coal, I might be able to forge a new one. I think I can make a mould."

"Coal." Claven sighed, "We got a shortage of that. The Arbiter's been confiscating all the coal he can get his hands on. I don't think that's even tradeable."

Alfre frowned, "I hate to suggest it."

"Then don't." She growled angrily, standing up, "I am not going to the mortal world. Not ever. They are all disgusting, vile creatures. I would sooner kill a human than make any deal with them. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Yes, madam." He replied quietly.

She kicked the ground in frustration, she hadn't meant to snap at him. It was a sensible suggestion. It just wasn't something she could tolerate. "Let me know if any of the Arbiter's things turn up again."

Her mechanic nodded quietly as she moved up the stairs to her loft above the engine room.

---



## Trei

Trei stood in the room, scratching his head. One moment he'd been holding Summer, and the next she'd been growling as she faded into thin air. He wasn't sure if she'd been attacked, or if something had just needed her attention. He'd wanted to ask Astrian, but the Fae was currently trying to pretend he didn't exist. He had absolutely no idea why. Maybe he'd insulted her.

There was a popping sound and a burst of static.

Trei stepped backwards, ready to attack, and then his face fell, "Luna? What happened?"

She waved tiredly, "Later... Say, Trei... Can I borrow your bed?"

The Fae under her arm glared towards him, "Ghoul, keep your distance. I will defend my lady by any means."

Luna ground her teeth, "Shut up, Rendi. Trei's safe."

"... Sure." He answered slowly, "It was yours, wasn't it?"

Luna limped down the hallway with her apparent bodyguard, and he heard her slump onto the bed with a thump. The Fae looked like she had been in a serious fight. He turned to look at the butler, "You still going to ignore me?"

Astrian did. However, to no one in particular she spoke, "I am going to assist Lady Luna." She glided out of the room, a haughty expression on her face, and then Trei couldn't help but laugh as he heard Luna moaning loudly, "Oh you would you just piss off? I want to sleep, not have a healing session!"

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped, looking over and seeing Summer. "Oh. You're back."

"Janus had Luna tortured." Summer growled quietly, "He's missing. You and her are in danger."

Trei flinched, "Oh crap. Things are out of control."

"Luna has... Kidnapped his army." Summer worded herself carefully, "But we don't know if that's enough. So, I'm going to be out of commission for a bit... I'm going to do something, to protect everyone."

Trei frowned, "I thought we'd moved passed secrets."

"I don't have the time to explain how it works." Summer snapped, "If Astrian can get over herself, she'll explain."

He nodded, stopping himself from asking how he'd insulted the other Fae. "I'm sorry."

"I... Want to do something first." Summer spoke hesitantly, and then touched Trei's face gently, "Something to make you remember that... I... I..."

He looked at her with concern, and the Fae leaned in suddenly, her soft lips meeting his, melding with him for a brief and perfect moment that took away his breath and made the room spin.

As suddenly as she'd started to kiss him, it ended. Trei blinked, feeling dizzy, and he heard Summer speak distantly, "I love you."

Then she was gone.

---

## Astrian

Astrian caught her breath, nearly losing control of the magic she was pushing gently against Luna's skin. The other jerked, dropping her dress, and knocking Astrian's hands aside. "She didn't."

The humble butler looked towards the doorway, "It appears the Lady Summer is doing something unwise."

"Forget that." Luna growled, "She kissed Trei!"

Astrian shrugged, "She may die. Maybe she deserved just a moment of happiness."

The princess glared at her, "Really? You're okay with this?"

Astrian didn't say anything, keeping her face straight. She'd been thinking about it, and had found herself coming to an inevitable conclusion. It was easier to ignore Trei, knowing what she did. He may have been an unimportant mortal in his last life, but none of that mattered anymore. He now held the power of a Fate, and was the paramour of two of the most important Fae in the realm. He was out of her reach. She was just a Fae. A friend to the Lady Summer, but still nothing more than her servant. Astrian's dreams of the two of them were nothing but fantasy, and the faster she learned to accept that she would never be whole, the better.

Luna sighed and sat down, an arm wrapping around her, "You know, I can hear your thoughts."

Astrian nodded politely. She couldn't speak. She'd cry if she did. It wouldn't be befitting someone with her role.

"Not that I'm complaining." Luna smiled weakly, "I didn't want the competition... But you know, I don't think Trei cares about stuff like that. He thinks you're cute. Otherwise you'd never have imprinted."

Astrian shook her head silently. She could never possess him. He belonged to the Queen, or to a Fate. She was unimportant compared to them, it was her duty to pull away from Trei and ensure that he took on one more important than herself. If he chose the Queen, then the future of the Fae might become brighter. The child. That was the future, not her.

Luna winced, "So you saw he had a kid with Summer, then?"

Astrian looked over at her, "My lady?"

Luna smiled, and shrugged, "I see every future. I was kind of hoping that one wasn't set in stone."

"What's Summer doing?" A haggard voice asked from the doorway, and two looked up at the ghoul. Not a ghoul. Astrian had to admit, he looked different now. He had taken his lessons to heart, and he almost looked healed now. If it weren't for his soulless eyes, he would seem human. He wasn't a ghoul, a monster of shadows, now. He was something more. Something unique. It didn't have a name. He was just... Trei.

Astrian swallowed, trying to regain control of her emotions, "The Queen has sealed the realm."

Trei shook his head, "So why does that mean she had to run away? Why did it make her think she might die?"

"Because she might, idiot." Luna replied, "All the Fae realms, they're connected. We move between them easy... Separating them isn't easy. It's downright dangerous, Trei. Summer might die. In fact, she probably will. She's cutting herself off from everyone else and most of magic."

"Where is she?"

Astrian sighed, hearing that timid desperation in his voice. It seemed the queen had already won. “No where, sir. She has exited what you understand to be reality, and entered a state of existence that no Fae has successfully described. A state of being shared by creatures such as the Fates and gods.”

Trei stared at her, “Summer... Ascended?”

Luna sighed at his hopeful expression, “Not like that. She’ll hold on for a bit... But she’ll die. No one can hold onto that kind of magic for long. It burns you out... Magic is like holding onto a thread, and it fills you and lets you pull a thread of reality, unravelling things a bit... But even that ends up killing you before long. Most people can barely touch magic. Hold it too long, or try and grab too much, and you die... What my sister is doing... Is grabbing every thread. She’s holding a piece of the power that created the universe, every realm. She’s Fae, she was never meant to do that. She’s holding a fragment of the power of creation itself. It’ll burn through her like nothing else.”

He sat down slowly in the doorway, “She was saying goodbye.”

“Yes.” Astrian asserted sadly. She didn’t know why Summer thought it was necessary, but it was tantamount to suicide. The only Fae to ever successfully hold that power was Summer, and she wasn’t technically Fae.

The three sat there silently, and then a low growl emerged from the man, his hands bunched into fists, “This all comes back to Janus, doesn’t it.”

Luna looked at him in surprise, “And? There’s nothing any of us can do to stop him. Buying us time whilst the other realms hunt him is the best Summer can do.”

“No, that’s not true.” Trei growled, “We can do something about him. Things are different now.”

Astrian raised an eyebrow, “I assure you, an undead creature is not much of a threat to the Arbiter.”

“Not just me.” Trei smiled grimly, “I’m more than ghoul. I’m part Fate. And I have a Fate who might be willing to do us a favour. And I have the most powerful human mage in history, who might be willing to help. And the two of you.”

Luna sighed, “We can’t, Trei. Summer just sacrificed herself to keep us safe. It’ll mean nothing if you somehow think you can make a handful of people into a war machine.”

Astrian considered the options slowly, carefully, “I do have an alternate suggestion.”

Both looked at her and she spread her hands, “There are two connected with this who are not being kept safe. They can act without endangering the sacrifice of my mistress. The Fate, who is unlikely to intervene in any event, and the human, who is likely to die the moment she meets resistance.”

Luna rolled her eyes, “Great. That’ll sure help.”

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing.” Trei growled angrily, and Luna sighed, “Sometimes, Trei, that’s all you can do.”

Astrian looked at the man who did not belong to her, “I can communicate with the others, if you wish.”

“I do. Let them know the stakes.” He said quietly and then he stood, “I’ll be outside. Regenerating.”

Astrian was silent for a time after he left, and turned to the princess, "Shall I continue?"

Luna shook her head quietly. All the fire had gone out from her. She hugged her knees to her chest and wrapped her wings around them, "I need some time alone."

The butler nodded, standing. She walked to the door confidently and then turned, "He is right about one thing, princess. We cannot simply do nothing and expect this problem to solve itself. My mistress is not more than equal to the Arbiter."

Luna didn't respond, her face hidden in her knees.

---

## Yio

Yio saw her aura flashed, as she felt the tug on the thread of fate wrapped around her wrist. She could feel Trei's bewilderment. His rise of hope and happiness. The clenched and unclenched her hands angrily. Summer knew others were tied to this mortal, and she just waltzed in and kissed him and then went off to die.

None of that was okay.

F'rir raised an eyebrow from where she was lounging, "And what, pray tell, do you think you're doing?"

"Screw you." Yio replied, sticking out her tongue. With the kind of ripple that had just moved through reality, she knew her sister had seen the change in the timelines. All of them. Trei had somehow consolidated so many of the fragile 'verses into one with a fixed event. Summer kissing him was fixed. An inevitability in all the timelines. It had happened everywhere at once.

So this was his choice, then.

Just one kiss, and he decided who it was he would be with for the rest of eternity. Or at least the eternities where he survived the coming cascade of events. It wasn't fair, and it wasn't sensible and... And she was jealous. Mindbogglingly jealous. She could find herself comparing herself to Summer. Her curves were nicer, or at least she thought they were. She was proud of the form she'd crafted for herself. It distracted men everywhere. It had made going down to the mortal plane ridiculously easy. If she wanted a tumble, she just had to show up and they would all do exactly what she told them.

She had a feeling that this mortal who had wrapped a tendril of fate around her damn wrist wouldn't even notice her.

She'd have to do something drastic to get his attention.

Something to make him focus on her, and forget Summer. She'd have to do something about Summer as well. Self-sacrifice was a worthy aim and all, but the celestials couldn't deal with a power vacuum just now. Things were tense enough. A murder wouldn't have the same effect. If you sacrifice yourself, nobody feels guilty for stepping in and stealing your power. If someone killed you... Everyone would hesitate. They'd want to talk things out first.

F'rir sighed heavily, "So, you've made up your mind, then."

Yio nodded curtly, and dropped her dress, stepping out of it and stretching, "I think this really is the best way forward."

"I don't think Sarin would agree."

Yio glared, "And are you going to stop me then, sister?"

The other pink-haired woman rubbed one of her ribbed ears and sighed, "I don't think that would accomplish much. I have a better alternative. This is the only time you can see the mortal. Never again."

Yio felt her heart drop, "Unless he joins us willingly, here."

F'rir tapped her chin, "That is... Acceptable. Do you really think he will?"

She shrugged, suddenly feeling less confident and excited. "There are so many fixed events ahead of him now... But he can change them. I just hope to teach him that. That he can decide the outcome of all of this, if he would just stop and think."

F'rir smiled grimly, "I think I will regret this, but... Go. Go have your moment of fun with the mortal. Make him blush and squirm in a room full of women who adore his existence."

Yio yanked on the ribbon around her wrist angrily, "You think I like this? It was never a choice."

"You will." F'rir replied, "You will adore him."

---

## Luna

She never wanted any of this. She could feel the walls inside herself that she'd spent lifetimes building beginning to crumble, to give way and reveal the truth of herself. The fragile girl hiding in her sister's shadow, too afraid to speak out, too scared to stand up for herself.

All she wanted for herself was to hide away and be forgotten. She wanted to cocoon herself and disappear into the shadows and darkness of her own mind and heart, to escape from this world and all the dangers that dogged her footsteps. She just wanted to be free. She didn't want to have to stand and fight, she didn't want to be the one who had to act. It fell to her, as it always did.

No one else had the guts to do what was necessary. No one else was willing to take the risk, but unless someone did then all of them would fall.

Why did it always have to come down to her?

Luna felt her fingers digging into elbows as her frustration built as the tears ran down her soft face silently. She could feel herself pushing her own muscles to their limits as she sat there, holding herself, trying to stop crying, trying to stop herself screaming inside her own head.

She just wanted all of this to go away.

To be sitting quietly by the fire, her head on her sister's shoulder, as she stared into the flickering tongues of light. To have him sitting next to them both.

Summer had kissed him.

She hated her sister down to her core for that. She'd claimed him as her own, knowing she was going to die. There was no coming back for her. That was what the kiss had meant. Not some petty victory of one heart over another. It wasn't Summer promising to come back to him... It was a promise that she wouldn't be. She'd taken her only and last selfish reward, knowing that she was going to be torn apart, and die in pain.

Luna sobbed, knowing she'd never see her sister again. The woman who raised her was gone. The one she'd always been able to turn to for help. No more quiet cups of tea in a beautiful garden, a separate paradise from the pace of the world. It was over now.

Summer was never coming back, no matter what any of them did.

---

## Rendi

Rendi stood near the ghoul, who was meditating, the ground around him dying.

It felt odd to stand here, in this paradise, when he knew what was happening around them. Life flowed around them in peaceful harmony. Insects buzzing, animals playing. The trees were singing in the gentle breeze. It was the melodies of his youth, when he was a young boy learning to survive alone in the forest. Somehow, in this tamed realm, it had recaptured the scent of the wild lands where he had scavenged and fought and killed. Had learned how to stay alive.

He felt perfectly at peace, though he knew a Fae was dying whilst grasping the last light of a dead god. Despite the fact he knew that his old master was beginning the final steps for war. This entire place would be scorched away in the rage that would follow them here.

Yet he couldn't grasp onto the urgency of the situation. His mind rebelled, desperately holding tight to an empty quiet.

He looked over at the ghoul, and wondered. Did this perverse serenity invade the mind of the mortal as well? Or was something plaguing the creature, driving it to prepare for the coming battles?

"Luna called you Rendi."

The assassin raised an eyebrow. It was unusual that a mortal would detect his gaze so easily, perhaps there was more to the creature than he could see. "Yes."

"Who are you, really?" The ghoul asked, a hint of venom in his voice.

Rendi considered the answer. He wasn't sure of it himself. "I am bound to the Lady Luna. My soul is hers until such time as I am extinguished from reality, or she sees fit to release me."

The ghoul leaned back, "You resent her?"

"I am incapable of negative thought or emotion towards her." He confessed easily, "I am bound to her."

The ghoul looked up at the sky quietly, "You were the one who hurt her, weren't you?"

Rendi felt a shock wave of guilt that threatened to stop his heart as he remembered the pain he'd inflicted, and the joy he'd felt at hearing her hiss and growl and scream. "Yes."

The creature fell silent, watching the sky. His face gave way to no emotions, and his mind seemed shut off. Rendi was impressed. These were the mental disciplines of a soldier, of someone who had seen battle and fought.

"I thought you were just a blacksmith's apprentice." Rendi began, "You have training though, do you not? A military of some kind..."

"We all do." The ghoul shrugged, "My world is at war. It has been at war since before I was born... I picked up my first sword when I was six, to defend my mother... It didn't work, of course. Nearly got me killed... I was conscripted when I turned ten. They just picked kids up off the street... I remember when the mage pointed me out. I was scared then. So scared... I wasn't scared in that first battle. I was angry then... But I was scared when they chose me to fight. When she chose me to fight."

Rendi felt his soul squirm in anxious thought, "She? The mage was a woman?"

"Vastras." The ghoul replied quietly, "Queen Vastras. She founded a city, to try and escape the politics. I really thought she died a long time ago... I didn't recognise her. How would I? Two



decades and she hadn't aged at all. There was a mage, a real mage. Not just someone grasping at magic, but someone who understood it. Who innovated and invented magic. She transformed us all without even trying. She built the spell that formed the shield of the city herself... Bound it. That spell withstood three sieges in my lifetime, without her needing to repair it. I have no idea how. Some sort of recrystallising or something. I didn't understand, I don't think anybody did." Rendi sighed heavily, "This name you speak evokes... Feelings... In my mistress."

"Vastras... Fell for me." The creature said quietly, "Or I think she did. Summer wasn't exceptionally clear on what she was meaning. Maybe Vastras just felt guilt for killing me. I don't know. I'd only seen magic a half dozen times before I died... And now..."

The assassin crouched, running a hand over the grass, "Inside, sir. Something approaches."

---

## Yio

Bare toes felt the grass underfoot as she touched the moist soil. Cold air filled her lungs as she moved quietly through the damp garden, looking around herself in awe. She could remember when this place was nothing more than a desert, a worthless realm where no life could survive. She had laughed when the little spark had embraced it as her lot... She'd stopped laughing when she saw the first flower bud a week later.

It was good to be back here.

A knife exploded into dust in front of her face, and she turned, picking a small yellow flower from a nearby tree and tucking it into her hair. She smiled as a bee buzzed in front of her for a moment. She turned and began walking towards the small little wooden hut. Flames and ice encircled her before turning to smoke and steam. She paused by the doorway to the house, glancing over her shoulder at the desperate assassin, "Coming, Rendi?"

The sweating and exhausted black-haired Fae stared at her in astonishment, "What are you?"

She shrugged, turning back as the door opened itself for her, "I would have thought that'd be obvious, even to something as dense as a Fae."

Her feet stepped onto the warm wooden floor, and she smiled, savouring the texture. Old wood, very old. It was gnarled and knotted, and seemed to echo tales from the dawn of the realm. It whispered her name, the name of the one who had created it. It whispered urgently of the danger for the one it loved. She walked forward slowly, turning and smiling as she saw the three waiting for her.

One was broken, half-healed, and held a deep hatred in her heart.

Another was attempting to carve out her heart and throw it away.

The last was alone, hurting and confused, and not at all understanding the path that was set before him.

She couldn't help but smile at them. They were brilliant. Each and every one of them. She was proud of what they had accomplished so far, and proud of what they would do in the time that had not yet passed. They were the key to achieving the dreams she had barely dared to hope, and they didn't even know just how strong they really were.

She curtsied, "Greetings."

---

## Azrael

He sat at the edge of the wooden floor, unstrapping his boots. It felt strange to be back here. It had been a long time since he'd visited the Temple. In fact, he hadn't at all since the goddess had chosen him and elevated him to status of paladin. Not since she had forgiven him for the sins of his past. The sins he wanted to forget, but could never forgive himself for.

He removed the warmers from his feet and placed them neatly with his boots.

"Master." A sister spoke, approaching him slowly. The woman was wearing a long flowing pink garment, and bowed low to the ground.

He smiled weakly and returned the bow, "I am but a child, and you the master."

His old mentor smiled and indicated the shrine at the other end of the long and unfurnished room, "Walk with me. Speak your mind. Let me be your master once more."

Azrael followed stiffly behind the sister, considering. His options weren't as open and plain as he would like them to be. His father might well be targeting him for assassination if dared to show any doubts, and he'd rather not deal with that sort of irritation at a time like this. No. What he really wanted was to sit in the quiet, and let the world pass him by. He wanted to return to the year of silence he'd first spent here.

"Ah." His master spoke slowly, "Yes, silence is preferable. You always did prefer quiet reflection to action, but you have rejoined the world, child. Inaction is for those who do not live. You gave that up, when you took up your new life as servant of the goddess."

Azrael nodded silently.

The sister paused as they got close to the shrine, and indicated it, "I shall leave you with her."

Azrael bowed, and the woman left. He sighed and bowed, head touching the ground, and closed his eyes. He focused them on the goddess. He'd never seen her since she appointed him, nor heard her. The only indication at all of her attention was whether or not she granted him power when he asked for it. Yet, now, he wished she would give him more. He needed guidance. Calis was a city of sinners, and deserved the destruction that might be wrought on it. Yet, not all people were sinners, and the military would not discriminate. They would do nothing but bring harm to innocent lives.

War was not kind. It was not fair. It was always a last resort, and once the war ended the true work began, rebuilding lives destroyed in the madness of mutual destruction.

A hand touched his shoulder lightly, and Azrael sat up slowly, pausing in surprise as he saw a woman in a white silk dress kneeling beside him. Her hair ran across her shoulders and down to the ground where it lay pooled in a strange pink river of threads. Her eyes were a pitch black, that seemed to sparkle in amusement as she saw him. The dress was adorned with a belt, clasped with a golden circle in the centre.

She smiled gently, "Well, the little boy returns."

He bowed, hiding his face from hers, "Goddess."

"Oh, stop it." She said playfully and punched him, "I came to you in this form. The least you could do is appreciate it."

Azrael looked up nervously, and she spread her hands, "What do you think? This physical shell is younger than my last. Is it cute enough?"

"Cute?" He questioned, "I'm afraid if that was the look you were intending, you have not

succeeded. Stunning, gorgeous, beautiful. A work of art in human form. These suggestions might fit better.”

“Oh, good.” She grinned at him, “Now, something on your mind?”

“Calis.” He frowned with concern, “My father wishes me to lead an army against them. He says that your temple has backed the attack.”

“True enough.” She replied, suddenly yawning and lying on her back, looking up at him. “I did, sort of. Not for the reasons your father thinks, nor for the reasons the sisters here might believe it. In fact, I don’t care whether Calis is destroyed or not. It isn’t the point. My intent is simple enough. For reasons beyond your understanding, I wish to place you in the right place, at the right time. This war will do so. I don’t care if it succeeds or fails. It will be your mission, but of higher priority is the greater mission, as always.”

“Magic.” Azrael winced, “You’re sending me to deal with a magical threat of some kind. If I follow my mission, I will encounter it, and feel the need to end it.”

Sarin smiled, “See, I knew there was a reason I appointed you my Avatar.”

“What is the risk, to the people?”

Sarin sighed, “Oh so concerned, little soldier boy. So concerned for the loss of life. For the innocent souls that will pass cleanly into the next world, where they shall have no regret. Let me set your mind afire. If you fail in the task I have set you, then I will die. My sisters will die. Every celestial will cease to exist.”

Azrael looked at her in terror, “Someone is close to recreating the original sin.”

“They will exceed it.” Sarin smiled tightly, “That much is inevitable. The gods will die. However, there is a chance. A small chance. One I keep alight. A candle shining in the dark depths of storm overhead. Everything threatens to snuff it out. You, boy, will act as my Avatar, and attack the city of Calis. You will purge it. Is that clear enough for you, idiot?”

He smiled sadly and nodded, “Forgive me, goddess.”

“You already know the rules for that.” She replied, sticking out her tongue, “First, you have to forgive yourself.”

---

## Trei

Trei was conflicted. On one hand, this woman had walked by a known assassin summoning all sorts of hellfire without a single scratch. On the other, she was stark naked, and the flower in her hair wasn't helping with the whole look she was portraying.

Astrian beside him spoke first, "Yio?"

He'd never heard her speak so hesitantly, timidly. He looked at the butler in surprise, and then back to the newcomer, "I'm afraid I don't know the name."

The naked woman shrugged as Rendi appeared behind her, and a gale of flames evaporated before they could touch her. Apparently without her even noticing them. She sat down beside the dead fire, crossing her legs deliberately, "Yes. You were mortal. A pity that you've missed out on so much, Trei. Hopefully, in time, we can rectify that. There are so many beauties, so many wondrous things in these worlds... You could see them all."

Luna sighed heavily, "Cut it out, Rendi. You can't touch a Fate."

Trei smiled ruefully and sat down on the couch, relaxing. "So, you're the one that Summer told me about then... Yio?"

The naked woman nodded, "Yes. I'm the youngest of my sisters. Which isn't really a term that makes sense to you, because, well, time is one my children. I gave birth to it. Lets just say, that in the nonlinear events that transpired before the Fates brought order, some of us were elder, and some were not. I was the least."

Trei laughed, "So that takes care of the question of how old you are, then."

She grinned at him, and Trei winced as he felt Luna dig her fingers into his arm as she sat down next to him. Yio leaned forward, "Oh good. The nerves have begun regenerating. You've made amazing progress, mortal, at learning how to maintain that sodden flesh you call your body."

He yanked his arm away from Luna, who immediately looked like she might cry, and turned his attention back to the newcomer, "I'm sorry, that sounded almost insulting."

"It's not your body anymore." Yio replied, shrugging, before she leaned back, stretching, "You've done well to keep it one piece... But I can do better than that. This body is waiting to die, nothing more. You need to let it go... But I can make a new one for you, it'll be entirely yours. And eternal, like your soul now is. No more worrying about burns or cuts. No more meditating in the garden... Well, not a requirement anymore. That is one indulgence I'd never wish to take from you. I'm quite jealous... Summer's garden is one of my favourite places in all the worlds."

Luna growled beside him, and Trei looked at her in surprise, "My sister is out there dying to keep Trei safe, and you're already trying to one-up her? Claim him?"

"I can't claim him." Yio rolled her eyes, "He's still part mortal. Even if he got the body of a Fate, as is his right. Little Luna, I am no threat to you or your sister's happiness. This one time is the only time I'll be allowed to visit. I created this problem by falling for him... So my sisters have decided that punishment shall be that I can never have him... But my heart will always belong to him."

Luna flinched, pulling back and grabbing Trei's hand, "That's cruel."

"Yes." Yio shrugged, "But I broke a lot of our laws when I tried to fate you, Trei, into loving me. I was a stupid petulant child, trying to make a mortal fall for someone... Different. I changed your fate, and that was cruel to you."

Trei sighed heavily, tossing around his thoughts but not landing on any single one in particular. It was a lot to take it. Especially while Summer was dying, he was facing a probable death at the hands of an assassin, and might be part Fate. Whatever the blazes that meant.

Yio smiled at him sadly, "You aren't part Fate, Trei. You are human. Completely, and wholly. Just like you were before you died, and just as you are now. You don't lose that just because you get something new. You're human, and you're a ghoul, and you're a Fate. All of them, all equally true."

He sighed heavily, "Great. Just what I needed, another woman who can read my thoughts in my life."

"Not thoughts. Timelines." Yio grinned, "You've asked me that question a few times. I thought I would anticipate it this timeline."

He cocked his head, "What?"

"I'm not linear, like you." Yio sighed heavily, as if she were explaining a difficult topic to a child, "I exist in every possible timeline. I exist in what you think is the past, the present and the future, simultaneously. I am everywhere, and everywhen. That is what being a Fate is... Like. We exist outside of the normal flow of causal relationships. If we didn't, we wouldn't be able to change someone's destiny would we?"

Trei winced, "But... You say I'm Fate. Doesn't that mean I should...?"

"Yes and no." Yio said with clear frustration, "You are outside the normal causal flow of events. You've made three Fae and one human lose their minds over you. You are... Experiencing time as a linear construct, true, in part. Part of that is... Habit. Part of it is the human in you, and I suspect a significant part is also the mindless ghoul in you. Hard for a creature of instinct to respond to a more unified picture of reality."

He sighed, shaking his head, "I... This is too much. Not on top of everything else."

"I'm sorry." Yio said, shrugging, suddenly seeming less confident and much more self-conscious, "I really am. Its my fault."

Her voice cracked as she continued, "I screwed up. And now I'm ruining your life. Again and again. Watching the man I wanted for myself get torn apart by his guilt and worry and... I can only help, right now. I won't be allowed to come back. You don't have the capacity to learn without time passing, and we don't have enough of what you call time to teach you how to use your powers... Once I give you a new body, Trei, just know that you can make things... Better."

Astrian finally spoke from her perch behind them, "You say that this is his right, can he claim it at a later time? Or is this opportunity it?"

Yio smiled over at Luna, "Oh, you should watch her. Trying to deny your own love is far more dangerous than seeking it. No, Astrian, this is not a final offer. Finality would imply time actually exists, but it doesn't. However, claiming the right might be difficult in what you view as the future."

Trei shrugged, "What do I have to lose? Things are pretty bad already."

Luna bristled beside him, looking at the Fate with a look that Trei strongly suspected might be considered a weapon of war in some circles, and then spoke quietly, "You changed my fate too, didn't you?"

"No." Yio yawned, "He did. I think I've said that a few times now. Try and keep up, honey."

Trei flinched as he felt a rush of wind, watching as Luna seemed to be frozen in midair, wings spread. Across from him Yio shook her head sadly, "That one, Trei, is full of anger. Much of it is

directed towards you. You'll have to be careful. . . But, stand up."

He walked over to the naked woman slowly, nervously, and she sized him, considering, "Time for that flesh to die."

He screamed as fire burned through him, as a sensation he could only describe as a tearing overwhelmed his every sense. He fell onto one knee, gasping for breath and holding his chest. He looked up at her weakly, tears in his eyes, "What was that?"

"You think that's air you're breathing?" Yio asked, raising an eyebrow, and Trei looked behind him slowly, staring as he saw himself there, lying prone. He looked at his hands cautiously. He still felt like he was physical. It wasn't like he was transparent or anything.

Yio grabbed his chin, picking him onto his feet with a single swift movement. She twisted his head back and forth, "Good. Your soul is intact. You live, Trei, because you have the will to live. So long as you keep fighting, you will never die. Well, you wouldn't die, but something else. Something worse."

He winced as he felt her fingers holding him, "You're strong."

She smiled cheekily, her eyes shining, "Yes. So are you. More than you know. . . I. . ." The Fate paused, touching his cheek softly, "I wish that you would want this. To know me. You could, one day. You could join us, become a real Fate. . . But you won't."

Trei felt a shiver run down his back, "I don't understand."

"I already know how this turns out." Yio rolled her eyes, "And you. . . Don't love me. You never do. Goodbye, Trei."

She turned around, and before he could speak she was gone. Luna crashed into the couch in a burst of wood and fluff. Astrian appeared next to his body, crouched, her wings spread. Trei turned, frowning at the butler who had tears in her eyes. "I'm not dead, Astrian."

The Fae's wings twitched and she glanced around, "Trei?"

Luna stood up, picking wood out of her hair, "The Fate killed him, Astrian. He's gone. Just like Summer. Everyone is dead, and everyone else is going to die."

"I'm not dead!" Trei yelled angrily, and Astrian stood up, "I can hear him, Luna. Somewhere nearby. . . She killed his mortal flesh."

Luna crossed her arms, "Then without a new body, like she promised, he's a goner. The spirits will come and drag his soul off to the next world. So. . . Yeah, he's dead."

Trei clenched his fists angrily, "I am not goddamn dead, Luna!"

The white-haired Fae went pale white, staring, "Tell me you saw that, Astrian."

The blonde stood up, and nodded slowly, circling where Trei was standing, "I think you can hear us, Trei. We can't see you, we can't hear you. . . You've been set a task. The only way to survive, to come back to us, is to. . . Learn how to be a Fate. This is a trial by fire."

Luna swallowed, twirling her hair unconsciously, "Oh, and Trei. . . You're terrifying."

---

## Luna

Rendi stood behind her as Luna sat on the roof, watching the sun set. He was silent, simply serving a role.

She hated herself a bit more.

She'd taken a person and poured out their soul, and filled it again with her own twist on it. She'd perverted him, changed him on a fundamental level. No one had the right to do that to anyone else, but it was the only way out she'd seen at the time. She could have easily stopped him, but even now she couldn't see a way of stopping Janus without crossing the line.

That was the problem. When you went up against someone so determined to play the game, and willing to break every rule, then the only way you could stop the nightmare was to become one yourself. There are no winners in war, and Janus had made this a war. Her kidnapping was the straw for the camel. Stolen lands, a growing military presence, spies everywhere... Janus had set himself up to be a dictator. Someone had to stop him before he took everything.

So she had.

If she had to hate herself for the rest of her life... She could live with it, if it meant that Trei wouldn't spend the rest of his immortal life fighting in a war. He was a warrior, a soldier. He'd already seen battle. He knew that war ate away inside you. That it burned you head to toe and though it might take years, one day you realise you're burned. She wouldn't let him go through that again.

Rendi served her, but the others didn't. She'd spared them from bastardisation and instead had just killed them. Three hundred Fae, snuffed out in an instant. Never to be reborn. Murder was one of few things that was abhorrent enough that it could break the bond that held a Fae to life. Eternity ended with the trauma. Murder didn't just kill the victim, it fractured the soul of the perpetrator as well, changing them, whether they liked it or not. Now she was a mass murderer. She expected that once this all ended, if she was still alive, then the Council would hand down a sentence that would be little more than an eternity of torture... And she'd deserve it.

The assassin sat beside her, "Is your heart always so heavy, mistress?"

Luna sighed, looking at the red-streaked sky, "I'm the Shadow Knight, Rendi. I'm who the Council sends when no one else is willing."

The man nodded slowly, "I was Janus' second. The first... He was like you, in many ways. His soul was stained by what he had seen and done. He embraced it and was spared your conflict. He became every part the weapon that Janus imagined him to be."

"Toleth." Luna whispered, "His corruption might be one of the most horrifying things in all of this. He was... One of the best. Of all of us. Willing to act, but unwilling to be defeated... Until Janus."

Rendi sighed heavily, "He owed a life debt."

"It's not an excuse." Luna growled, fighting back tears, "There is no excuse to losing hope. Not ever. We are Fae. We cannot be defeated, not by anything."

The assassin looked up thoughtfully, "Perhaps that's the secret of the Arbiter. He learned how to conquer us... And make us thank him for it."

The princess just sneered. Outwardly she was a hot angry mess. Inwardly, it was worse. Hate poured through her veins, burning her up. She hated the fact that she lived while Summer died.



She hated the fact she couldn't help Trei. She hated the Fate who had waltzed in claiming to help, and all they'd done is make her lose him. Maybe forever. She wouldn't know when, if he lost. If his soul was taken... They wouldn't know when. It'd be a guess days later. She hated Janus for taking a peaceful world and twisting it to prepare for war. She hated Astrian for being able to hear him.

... She was alone. Alone with the person she hated most in all the realms.

Herself.

---

## Ashwen

She woke up tiredly, ruffling her hair as she shrugged off the blanket from around her shoulders. She stretched her wings as she stood up, feeling the first sunlight of the day barely peaking through the clouds and tantalising her exhausted body. Flecks of blue dust drifted lightly the ground and she yawned, wondering why she'd woken up so early.

Usually she didn't force herself awake until Lord Ashwith chided her for staying wrapped up in her cocoon for too long.

She turned slowly, eyeing a shadow with trepidation, and went to scream as she saw him. The Fae blitzed across the room, clamping a hand over her mouth. She stared in terror into those deeply serious grey eyes, wondering if he had come to kill her, or kidnap her.

"I've come to explain." He whispered quietly, "Please, Lady Ashwen, let me explain. Let me tell you why I did what I did. I'll accept whatever judgement you give me. If after hearing this you decide to hand me over to the council, then I'll do it without complaint. Please. You, of all people. Won't you just listen?"

She pushed him away from her ruffly, and grabbed her blanket, wrapping it around her naked shoulders and sitting on the edge of the bed, glaring at him. "Start."

Janus sighed heavily and sat down cross-legged, his black wings curling up behind him, "It began, with a mortal. A mage was experimenting, attempting to recreate the original race of people, the original immortals. He found power to do what he wanted in an unborn child. He manipulated them, using magic he had stolen from Faekind. I couldn't kill the child. I tried, without being obvious. I sent the child into a mortal war, conscripted before he came of age. He survived. He shouldn't have, no one else of his age did. Yet, fate shifted and protected the child."

Ashwen ground her fangs together angrily, glaring at the man she so desperately wanted to kill. She was letting him speak. It didn't mean she had any intention of listening. When he finished yammering on, she would rip his head off and present it to the queen herself. He had used her.

"The mage died, and another took up his work, guiding this creature that wasn't quite human through life. Until, that very same mage, killed the not human." Janus whispered, and Ashwen felt a chill go down her spine. The Arbiter nodded slowly, "Yes. The not human was the ghoul that has attached itself to the queen. He was engineered to survive his death. He is a weapon, aimed directly at our queen."

"Why hurt Lady Luna?" Ashwen spat out angrily and Janus sighed heavily, "The queen sent Lady Luna on her behalf to the fates. The same creatures who guide and protect this ghoul. I had to know what was said, and what was requested. It was stupid, yes, but I still believe it was vital to the protection of our realm. I failed. Luna took control of the questioner instead. I fully believe our queen is being manipulated by the fates and that the fates have broken the treaty. To protect us, I had to know what we were up against. I couldn't see another way. If there was, I would have taken it. The fates are an enemy like none we've ever faced. They can manipulate us, control us, and we wouldn't be aware. It takes a celestial to see the actions of fate, rather than just the result. They are subtle, and unbound by time. Nothing we can do seems to be able to stop them. Our only chance is Queen Summer. She is the only one of us who can act against them."

Ashwen was still feeling bitter, but the feelings were subsiding. "You didn't want to involve Lady Summer until you had proof. Proof beyond doubt."

"Yes." Janus nodded, "And so I made a mistake. I shouldn't have hurt Luna."

“That explains your idiocy. It doesn’t explain everything.” Ashwen growled angrily.

He looked at her in surprise, his grey eyes apparently empty of all understanding. Idiot. He snuck into her bedroom, early in the morning before she had a chance to get dressed, and didn’t understand anything.

Janus looked down at his feet, “I wasn’t lying. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Stand up.” Ashwen growled angrily, and the dishevelled Fae snapped upright. She stood up, stepped towards him, glaring. She was sick of his words. He was too good at saying things. The sort of things that made you feel like he might be reasonable. She wanted a straight answer. One that cut right to the heart of the matter, one he couldn’t fake.

“Kiss me.”

Janus blinked in surprise, “What?”

“Shut up.” Ashwen snapped, “I told you to kiss me.”

His hands were gentle, but calloused. His scent was of tree smoke. His lips were soft, and kind. He didn’t force himself on her. His kiss was gentle. A tentative embrace that made her breath catch in her throat. The blanket slipped from her shoulders and her arms moved around his waist, just holding him. A quiet fire burned between them.

---

## Astrian

Astrian carefully swept up the remnants of the couch. She was fastidious, not a single splinter escaping her attention. Her face was a picture of calm serenity, but her thoughts were a cacophony of... Something else.

Fragments from the Fate's speech. The teasing tone of a divine creature that had so easily cut through the barriers she had carefully erected around her heart. Hearing Trei screaming in pain. Watching his body topple as the Fate vanished. She'd felt as if time had stopped when Trei fell. She'd moved to his side with a teleportation spell, burning through her mana reserves in her urgency, and yet he'd hit the ground before she'd been reassembled. He fell slowly, whilst even at her best she simply wasn't fast enough to catch him.

She wasn't enough for him.

She wasn't a royal, she wasn't a divine. She wasn't the most awe inspiring, and she wasn't the most powerful. She wasn't the most beautiful, and she wasn't an artist who could render beauty. She wasn't a warrior who could destroy an army, and she wasn't the politician whose words could stop whole armies in their tracks. She was a household servant. She cleaned and cooked and most people barely even registered her existence. Her job was best done when no one realised she had even acted. She was the kind of person to fade into the background. Deserved to fade into the background. Glory wasn't hers. It wasn't her right to seek out happiness. That belonged to the people above her.

He belonged to the people above her.

She felt again a stab of pain through her heart as she remembered the flash of auras as Summer had kissed him. She'd died in that moment. Reminded of her place in the realms, and in this household. She was nothing more than a stupid servant girl lusting after her mistress' lover. Her betrothed.

Summer would marry him. That was fate, if nothing else was.

Astrian would fade into the background, a feature of their household. She'd stand quietly in the corner, waiting to be called as Summer's daughter played with Trei in front of her. That was destiny.

The butler paused, letting out a quiet sob as she held the handle of the broom. She couldn't change the world, nor could she change how she felt. She wished she could scream that it was unfair. But it was. She was a nobody.

---

## Claven

Claven sat up, feeling odd. She ran a hand through her red hair, detangling the mess as she looked around the room, trying to pinpoint what was off. There was nothing out of place, but something was very wrong. She sighed, standing up and slipping on the black shirt that she'd been wearing when she fell asleep, buttoning it and walking down the stairs and into the engine room.

She paused halfway down the stairs.

That was it.

The engine wasn't making a single sound. It had stopped turning. Which made so little sense. Even if the wheel had broken down again it would still be drifting back and forth, and she should be hearing the waterfall that powered the entire thing. Silence meant something fundamental had changed. Had the Arbiter blocked off the water source? Or was her people under attack?

Claven walked down the remainder of the steps and turned, clenching her fists, and paused as she did see an intruder, but one she had no idea about attacking. They weren't Fae, there were no wings. In fact, apart from the ribbed ears and pink hair they could have passed for human.

"Ah, there it is." The woman said turning and smiling at her, "The violence in your petty little heart. That's what I came to see."

Claven glared, "Who are you?"

"The wrong question." The woman replied, "Who am I doesn't really matter, does it? What I am, and what I can do, and I want you to do are the questions. The first two are easy to answer. Take a look outside. See why the wheel stopped turning."

Claven approached a window cautiously and took a glance, and recoiled in terror. The waterfall was still pouring, or it had been. It was frozen in midstream. Whoever this was, was controlling time. They'd pulled her out of time.

Claven swallowed nervously turning, "You're a Fate."

"Yes." The woman grinned slowly, "And what I want from you, little Madam Claven, is a little bit of backbone. Events are happening that we can't abide by. So I am going to make a request of you. Do you know what that means?"

Claven flinched, "I can't refuse."

"Correct!" The woman clapped, grinning at her, "You have to do what I say. And what I'm telling you, is to take every one of your little shades, and attack Lady Luna. You are to execute the princess. Is that understood?"

---

## Summer

Summer strained, her face covered in sweat, her wings drooping and without colour. Her feet were planted, but her knees were shaking. She couldn't keep this up much longer. She could feel the essence of magic burning her, burning out each nerve ending in her body, leaving her numb, but coughing and dying. She was dying. Nothing she knew of could sustain this physical form much longer. She'd reinforced each of the cells, carved conduits made of materials she had invented on the fly into her. Her brain was half-crystal now, as the neurons failed she'd replaced them slowly, one by one. She couldn't sustain this forever.

Parts of her would die, and she wouldn't be able to replace them all, not in time. In time, everything fails.

"Except love, don't you think?"

Summer swallowed, turning her gaze with weary exhaustion to the calm and happy being who had materialised beside her. Whilst Summer was choking on the magic, the one next to her seemed to snuggle into it, like a warm blanket on a winter's eve. The Fate smiled at her, "Oh. Do stop, Summer. I'd rather you didn't die, not just yet."

The Fae managed to bear her fangs, but no more. Her vocals chords were gone, dissolved.

The Fate waved a hand tiredly, and Summer gasped as she felt the magic ripped from her grasp. Yio yawned, "I didn't come to watch you die, stubborn idiot. I've come, very much against my will, because it is not your destiny to die here. My sisters have decreed it."

Summer fell forwards onto her hands, coughing blood into the empty void. There was no floor as such, no true physicality. She raised her head tiredly, glaring. She'd never got along with the Fates, but Yio least of all. The creature was far older than she was, but also a cruel and immature child.

Yio brushed her dress and sat down slowly on a chair that materialised for her, "I spoke to Trei. I was required to tell him this situation was my fault, and as such I must have no further contact with him ever again. A half-truth, wouldn't you say?"

Summer dropped onto her back, glaring up at the endless void.

The Fate continued quietly, "This was not my fault, Summer. It was yours. My fate is bound to you, you senseless little creature. All the Fates are bound to you. Your death would mean ours, and most of reality along with it. Your world would have been permanently lost to the void. Those three would be all that is. You would condemn them to that fate?"

She didn't answer. She wasn't required to answer to the Fates. Never had been. She saw no reason to create a new set of vocal chords just to deal with her.

Yio hissed angrily, "We gave him an eternal body, Summer. He will be eternal. He will outlive you."

Vindictive, and cruel. Summer smiled to herself, and woefully ignorant of just what kind of creature Trei was.

The Fate stood over her, glaring down, "I was naked when I saw him. Does that create any angst in you? He's had more of me than you ever will, if you die here."

Summer rolled her eyes. Then she traced a finger through the magic, barely touching it as it filled her for a moment, and Yio gurgled as she was hoisted into the air, clutching at a nothingness around her throat. Summer stood up slowly, glaring at the creature as it flailed in her trap. She

fractured the air in front of her so it reverberated, “To claim that which is mine, is not possible little Fate. Struggle and cry, and you will die. You have attempted to pervert that which is mine. No choice of your kind may interfere with my path. Do you not remember the terms? You have breached our treaty. Shall I execute you here? I would be within my rights.”

Yio stared at her, terrified, her eyes beginning to water as the physical form she inhabited began to feel the effects. Summer dropped her to the ground releasing the woman. She placed a foot on her shoulder and kicked her onto her back. Yio looked up at the Fae leaning over her, at the small smile on her face, and began to shake in fear.

---

## Vastras

The one-eyed mage stumbled as the tunnel behind her sealed astonishingly quickly.

She sniffed the air, taking in her new location. It was strange. Pleasant. It was as if the realm itself was trying to drain the violent thoughts from her head, to force her into some kind of peaceful submission. The air stank of magic. A magic that was foreign to her. That was surprising.

A magic that she was familiar with formed behind her, and she spun, lifting her new blade to block the knife. The man standing there showed a brief look of surprise before he went to attack again. The mage sneered and he fell to his knees as a crystal on the necklace around her neck glowed. “Stored gravity.”

The assassin winced, struggling to stay semi-upright, “You will not endanger the Lady.”

“I will not.” She replied, “I am here for personal reasons, not to kill whomever you may be protecting.”

The man nodded, his black wings curling up as he tried to fight off the gravitational waterfall spilling out against him. The mage released the crystal, and he gasped, breathing easier.

She turned, looking at the small wooden house, “I wish to speak to Lady Summer. Is she available?”

“No.” An angry voice came from above as a Fae lighted softly in front of her.

The mage bowed briefly, “Lady Luna.”

The Fae shook her head in amazement, “How did you get here, mortal?”

“I am Queen Vastras.”

Luna cocked a hip, placing a hand on it, “That’s your name. Not an answer.”

“It is both.” The mage yawned, and then frowned, “He’s... Not here, either. That’s odd. I followed his soul here.”

Luna winced, “Trei. You’re the mortal who imprinted on him.”

She nodded curtly, “Where is he? It doesn’t make sense that I could follow him if he isn’t.”

“He’s here.” Luna spoke angrily, “But not. Apparently he’s part Fate. And they decided to give him a body fitting it or something. He’s... In between worlds?”

Vastras felt all levity vanish, and she rattled as she dragged out a dozen objects out of a pocket before putting them back, she looked at the Fae in annoyance, “We need to help him. It’s urgent. I know of way, but it’ll require... Something of value. To him. The idiotic terrible blacksmith. He didn’t even have a favourite tool. Does he here?”

Luna winced, “Come inside, I guess.”

---



## Astrian

Astrian looked at the injured mage and then to her mistress' sister, "I'm afraid I don't know of anything that the master valued more than anything else."

The mage paced back and forth, thinking, loudly and mostly repetitively. Astrian rubbed her temple subconsciously, and the mage froze mid-step. "You, Fae, you can hear thoughts?"

She curtsied briefly, "I am Astrian, caretaker for the Lady Summer. I do possess extraspiritual abilities."

The mage walked over to her, taking her hand in two human hands that felt as rough as those of a miner, "Then I need you to focus. We may not have the means to drag his soul back here, but we do have the means to reach him, through you."

Luna tsk'd loudly, "Slow down. You're a mortal. This is Fae territory."

Astrian flinched as she saw the aura around the woman rapidly fluctuate, "Lady Luna, don't antagonise her. That is not a mortal."

Luna stared in surprise and Astrian sighed, "Perhaps there is time to tell us of the danger facing the one we all... The ghoul."

The mage smiled at her, "Yeah, suppress those emotions. That'll help. We need them, right now. The Fates have broken the tie between his soul and his flesh. In most Fates, this would cause the start of their rebirth cycle. They'll spend a few aeons in the void, learning to control fundamental magics, before the embark upon what is supposed to be their greatest triumph, the construction of an eternal physical shell to dwell in. But he's not a Fate. Not even partly. That's a flat out lie. He is more than mortal, but he always was."

Astrian frowned, "She speaks truth, Lady Luna, or at least believes she does."

Luna clenched her fists, "Yio and the Fates cannot act against Lady Summer. Acting against him, acts against her."

"Unless they plan to sever her connection to him." The mage shrugged, "Which I believe they're currently doing, unless Yio has another reason for dwelling in the voiden cosmos?"

Luna glanced at Astrian, "Can we trust her?"

"She would not endanger Tre... The mortal." Astrian swallowed, "She loves him. Wholeheartedly. Her greatest regret in her... Exceptionally long life... Is his death."

The princess sighed heavily, "What do we do, Queen Vastras?"

"Feel your love for him." The mage replied quietly, "Astrian, open your mind to me. I'm sorry, I'm about to invade it. It will be... Unpleasant."

Astrian sat down, tucking her dress under her knees and breathed slowly, stilling herself. She put the palms of her hands against each other, her fingers pointing to the sky and felt the doorway to her soul flare as her magic touched its own source. She cracked the door open slowly, a task she had not done since the early days of the Fae. Days when she was barely beginning to understand the nature of magic, before she'd understood that the random flashes of light and sensation were a person's aura, or that not everyone had the gift to see them.

She felt the force invade her. A will stronger than her own thrust through the crack and into her. She gasped, struggling to breathe as the memories of who they were washed over her, becoming a part of her. Every death. Every discovery. Every ounce of self hatred. Astrian groaned painfully

as she saw the wars, and ordered the deaths of her own people. Thousands, for a slim chance. She felt faint, her mind being overwhelmed as she saw the lengths that a young woman had gone to. For a chance at peace. The way she had butchered her soul, twisting and corrupting it, just to stay alive long enough to bring the dream to fruition.

Astrian felt terrified tears run down her face as she realised how close that dream of the last thousand years was to falling apart.

“Stay with me.” Vastras growled, a hand clamping down on Astrian’s shoulder tightly, “Turn your thought to him, now Astrian. Become a light to guide him home. Feel. Your love must shine.”

She wasn’t worthy. She still wasn’t worthy. Nothing about her deserved him. The hand on her shoulder clenched ever tighter. How could the warrior who had twisted the very fabric of the world think she should let herself feel this? Wasn’t Luna enough? A princess, and probably the most powerful mage mortalkind had ever seen. Were they not enough?

“Say his name!” Vastras yelled angrily.

Astrian looked at the floor, feeling her heart stab with agony, and she whispered to the air, “Trei.”

---

## Janus

Janus turned slowly in surprise as he saw the battered soul standing up.

“I thought I’d reminded you of your place.” He growled angrily, but the mortal ignored him, turning. It fixed the gaze of those lifeless eyes somewhere else, far afield.

Janus stood up, dripping dust in every direction, “Mortal.”

The soul standing there smiling slowly, “Astrian.”

Janus felt his heart skip a beat, and glanced over at one of his guards. The man left to check the perimeter. He turned back, casting a simple spell, and he stared in shock. A thread of the mortal’s soul was detaching, floating freely and drawn by a current he couldn’t detect.

The soul was unravelling, drawn towards something. It would destroy it.

Janus sat back down, waving a hand, “Carry on.”

---

## Luna

Luna collapsed, spent.

The princess looked at her shaking hands and the patchwork of blackened veins leading up her arms. That was not a good sign. Her magic was corruption after all, but when it started corrupting its own source... Things would be turning on their heads a little. When black dust corrupted itself it became the Fel.

She looked up from the floor where she could see the not-mortal mage. The woman was covered in sweat, and her cloak lay on the ground. However, she was still casting. An intricate spell, a swirling form of magics that she barely recognised, including her own. That explained the drain a bit more clearly. The mage was using her magic in ways she'd never even attempted. Who knew what effect it would have on the flow?

"Astrian." The mage growled, "He's here. Lend me your memories."

The caretaker screamed in agony and dropped face-forward into the wooden floor. Luna watched, too weak to do anything. Astrian was bleeding from her eyes. Whatever the mage was doing... It was too much. She was going to kill them both in an attempt to rescue someone from a Fate. It was stupid for them to even try.

"Luna." The mage spoke angrily, "Your turn. Focus your mind on Trei."

The princess glowered at her, but felt her memories sifting of their own accord. That first time, when she'd shifted into her bedroom. She'd tried to skid to a halt, amid dimensions as she saw the burned skin. Strong legs, stronger arms. A blacksmith. Fit as a fiddle, and with the cutest look of surprise in his eyes. Her heart had just about stopped. Moreso when she realised that the only thing he had on was a pair of underpants that didn't leave a lot to her rather active imagination.

The mage twitched, trying not to burst out laughing.

Luna clenched a fist weakly, "Shut up. Wasn't my fault he decided to be naked."

"You could have knocked." A new voice echoed.

All three looked over tiredly, and then stared in surprise. The figure waved a hand, "Reconstruct."

Now there were five in the room.

Luna smiled, tears flowing down her cheeks, "Trei."

---

## Trei

He stumbled, feeling weak. It felt wrong, not having to yank on his body to make it move.

He looked up at the woman standing in front of him, and stared in shock, “Summer.”

Her smile was small, distant. Not the woman who’d stolen a kiss right before disappearing to die. There was something... Harder about her. She looked around and nodded, “Figures. It took all of us to bring him back.”

Trei sat down weakly before he fell over, and looked up, “You all came... For me? Why?”

A hand hit his shoulder weakly, and he looked over seeing Luna barely staying conscious, “Don’t... Ask... Stupid... Questions.”

Sofia sat down against his back, “If you make me abandon Calis again, I will rip out your heart myself.”

Trei laughed, “Haven’t you killed me enough?”

By the way her breathing changed he’d hit a spot that was a bit more sensitive than he’d expected. “Sorry.”

Summer knelt down across from him, self-consciously smoothing her skirt and tucking her hair, “Trei. I shouldn’t left you. I’m sorry.”

He felt his anger swarm up for a moment, but took it twisted and pushed it aside, “You got me back. Let’s call it even.”

Astrian whispered from where she was lying beside the couch, “Back from where?”

Trei clenched his fists angrily, causing the bones to crack audibly, “Yio gave my soul to Janus.”

He felt Sofia tense up, and saw a quiet rage enter Summer’s eyes. The woman in front of him was different, terrifying. This was the monster than Janus was so terrified of that he wouldn’t risk moving openly, even now that he was exposed. This was the woman willing to do whatever it takes.

This was the woman who had risked her life for his worthless soul.

He smiled, “I think our time is about up, isn’t it, Summer?”

She blinked in surprise, “Seriously?”

Sofia coughed politely, “Hi. New person here. What are you talking about?”

Luna laughed weakly, “The wedding. Trei is suggesting they go ahead with the wedding of Lady Summer, and himself.”

Sofia launched to her feet, “Over my dead body!”

Summer raised an eyebrow, “Do you think that option is undesirable to me, queen?”

Trei frowned, looking at the mage, “Queen. Vastras. Really?”

Sofia glanced down, embarrassed, “Eh... Yes.”

“She’s not human, Trei.” Summer continued, enjoying riling up her rival, “Did you know that? She became something... Different... A long time ago. Couple thousand years by my reckoning.”

Vastras looked embarrassed and sat down next to Trei, leaning on his shoulder, “To cut a very long and embarrassing story short, Trei... I stole some of Summer’s magic one day and used it to... Become a sort of... Part-god?”

He looked at her deadpan, “Demigod. I got killed by a demigod.”

Vastras cringed, “Can we not talk about that? And instead talk about you not being forced into a marriage?”

Trei shrugged, smiling over at Summer, “It isn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.”

---

## Summer

Summer felt her heart plummet to the floor.

He actually liked her. After all of this. After having his soul ripped out of his body multiple times and then tortured and torn apart and reconstructed... He actually liked her. She didn't deserve this. She'd ruined every aspect of his life. If she'd just stayed out of things he'd probably be resurrected and married to Vastras by now. Instead, here was the stupid Fae demanding that he belong to her.

"We don't have to, Trei." She said, each word ripping a chunk in her soul, "The Council is unlikely to enforce something the Arbiter pushed for, now. Not until he's caught, anyway."

Trei shook his head, his black eyes looking at her as he smiled, "The wedding has to go ahead, Summer. Partly because that's exactly when Janus was planning his little box of horrors. Mostly because..."

He trailed off, and looked embarrassed, "Um... Uh... Sorry, not trying to insult you, I just..."

Vastras glared at him from where she was leaning on him, "Dude. You have a roomful of people who don't want you to say it."

Summer felt her cheeks flush red as understanding dawned, right as Trei burst out, "Summer, will you marry me?"

Time slowed to a crawl. She could hear her heart beating in her ears. Vastras pulled back from him, her hands closing to angry fists, her eyes glistened. Luna looked away from him, a shudder passing through her. Astrian struggled to raise her head, still bleeding.

Summer felt the presence arriving behind her, and pushed against the flow of time, turning with agonising slowness to stare angrily. A Fae stood there, stepping through a crack in reality, but not quite arriving. His wings were black, so were his eyes and his hair. He stood there, out of reach, out of sync with reality, watching her, and watching the event unfold.

She focused, feeling the light burning behind her eyes, breaking free of her own time stream to match his, "Tyr."

The man looked at her tiredly, but with a slight hint of surprise around his eyes, "Summer. Strange. Last time it took you much longer to realise I was here. Much longer to break free... Ah. You've touch power recently. A lot more power than you have now... Don't you feel weak?"

"If you ruin my wedding, I will ruin your eternal dead life." She threatened, glaring at the observer. Tyr never interfered in events, never openly. Yet he was always there. Stepping from the in-between to watch as everything went to hell. Watching, out of reach, out of touch. Only the most powerful Fae were even aware he existed. No one could match him. Because he wasn't Fae. He was what happened when you resurrected a Fae. And failed.

Tyr shrugged, looking around the room as time continued to slow, approaching the moment he had come to watch. "I think you want to forget me, and remember the man who just asked to marry you... In a room full of women besotted with him."

Summer looked back uncertain, "Tyr... What do you know about Trei?"

"I observe, Summer. The fact you can notice me does not mean I will tell you what happens next." The Fae said tiredly walking up beside her, a trail of light linking him back to the half-closed doorway he'd stepped through.

“Why do the Fates hate him?”

Tyr laughed, looking at her, “Persistent. That’s new. Usually you’d banish and be done. Or try to.”

Summer shook her head, “Yio gave his soul to Janus. . . What reason could she have?”

“Every reason.” Tyr sighed heavily, “You’ll work it out. Maybe in time.”

Summer glared at the untouchable bastard, “Not even a hint?”

“Just this one.” The Fae said, turning to leave.

Summer threw her eyes back to the moment, and stared in horror. As she felt herself being pulled back into the normal flow of time she threw up the first spell she could summon.

---



## Astrian

Astrian couldn't see out of one eye, two of her lungs seemed to have stopped functioning, she couldn't move her wings, but she could hear thoughts. She yelled angrily, taking the last energy she had to use, the stuff keeping her brain functioning and her lungs breathing, and pushed it into an explosive spell.

The light faded before she could see if it hit Janus as he stepped from a corridor and grabbed Trei.

She felt like she was falling. It was a familiar feeling.

She'd felt it over so many lifetimes.

She was dying. She'd burned out her lifeforce trying to drag Trei back, and had already been on the verge of death. Now she'd spent her last to try and keep a hold of him. To try and stop the one Fae she'd wished had never been born.

Her soul tumbled through the void, slowly fading as it struck the lifestream, rejoining the flow of magic. This was the rejuvenation process. When her memories were stripped away, and her soul was purified and restored. The moment before rebirth.

---

## Luna

Luna pushed herself upright, almost tripping on her wings and stood there, fighting the exhaustion that was trying to take her. She was too tired to grab hold of magic, but she had to do something, anything.

Janus had walked in and taken him. Like it wasn't even an effort. He'd known exactly where Trei had been standing. He'd known how to create a gateway to Summer's realm, even though it wasn't connected to the other realms fully.

"Mage. What kind of gateway?" She spoke, slurring as she was too tired to move her jaw. Vastras winced, "Yeah, I can't do magic yet, either."

"It wasn't a gateway."

Luna turned to her sister and stared in surprise, "How are you channelling? You shifted a realm."

Summer nodded, "Yeah. It makes the small crap easy."

Vastras tapped Luna's shoulder, "Where did Astrian go?"

Luna rolled her eyes, "She'll be back. She died."

"What?"

Luna turned to her in surprise, "Seriously? You didn't notice that you burned her out? Nearly burned all three of us out?"

Vastras shrugged, "And? I burn myself out once a week. Just takes time to recover."

Luna blinked in surprise, "Oh. That's weird."

The mage stared, "Fae can't replenish?"

Summer spoke with irritation, "Sure we do. We rejoin the life stream. Our souls are eternal. Doesn't mean our bodies are. Reconstruction is required. A shorter lifespan comes with different benefits. Now, focus! Janus stole Trei. How?"

Vastras collapsed onto the couch, brushing sweat from her forehead, "You said it wasn't a Gateway. I thought Gateways, Fractures and Channels were the only ways to travel between the Fae realms."

Luna sat down, staring at the spot where he'd vanished, "There's also Dusting, Entanglement and Splitting."

Summer stepped over, a halo of light around her, looking at the air, "None of those match this. . . No. This is a new magic. It's. . . It's almost like Janus stepped sideways through the dimensional matrix. We can move short distances, and then have to bounce from a shift to a channel and back to a shift when stepping through the dimensions. . . But he just shifted."

Luna rubbed her temples, "A shift can't be traced."

"There is someone else who can come and go this easy." Summer said slowly.

Luna looked up at her sister, "You cannot be serious."

Vastras sighed heavily, looking at a hand stretched above her head, "Fates. They were willing to give Trei to Janus before. I guess they taught him a few things."

“You don’t get it.” Luna said shaking her head, “The Fates can’t oppose Summer. They can’t interfere with her. Summer imprinted on Trei, which makes him untouchable.”

Vastras dropped her hand, looking over at the two, “Seriously? How does that work?”

Summer sighed heavily, “The Fates... They can’t interfere with creatures equal to themselves. Celestials. Gods, demiurges, and so on. No celestial can interfere with another. Its a treaty. There was a war once. The entire universe had to be stitched back together, and we didn’t manage to get everything in the right place.”

Vastras blinked, “We? Are you a celestial, Queen of the Fae? Last time I checked, that just makes you eternal. Not something... More.”

Luna burst out laughing, “You really don’t know, do you? Who created the Fae, mage?”

Vastras glared at her, “Sumner. Lady Summer here was her first creation.”

Summer nodded, “True. I was created as the template of all Fae... By Sumner sacrificing herself.”

“Oh.” Vastras replied, “You are Sumner, aren’t you?”

“In a way.” Summer sighed, the magic fading from around her, “My first life was her first incarnation as a Fae... It took a few lifetimes before we learned to recover our past memories. Those first few are gone. We lost them. I think I was... Five or six hundred cycles old when we discovered I was Sumner. Archaeologists knew it before I did.”

The human shook her head slowly, “Wow. You are an actual celestial... Limited by a physical form... But a celestial. No wonder Janus is so jealous.”

Luna looked at her, “Jealousy, you think that’s his angle? Bastard has been seizing power. He wants to be King.”

“No.” Vastras shook her head, “No, I’ve dealt with politicians like him. He’s trying to hurt you, Lady Summer. Everything he does is meant to embarrass you, or weaken you in front of the council. Him getting power out of it is just an added bonus. He might even believe its the goal... But he wouldn’t have stolen our boy if it was just power. He’d finish cutting off this realm, permanently.”

Luna flopped backwards onto the hardwood floor, struggling to keep her eyes open. “He knew we were vulnerable.”

“I don’t think I have a choice this time.” Summer spoke quietly, “Janus is calling me out. I’m going to issue a summons. He wanted a war... He’s going to get one.”

The princess closed her eyes, shivering. She remembered the last time her sister had spoken those words, and what had followed. No Fae wanted that. They abhorred the violence, the destruction. Killing a Fae severed them from the lifestream. The violence that fractured a soul. Hundreds had died last time.

By her hand. She was the Shadow Knight. She was a weapon of war.

Her soul was stained with the blood of other Fae.

Now it would be again.

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

---

## Vastras

An irritating sound cut through her dreams and Vastras opened her eyes slowly with a glare.

It took her a few minutes to place the sound, and herself.

She was lying on a couch by a fireplace, in one of the Fae realms.

And somewhere, quite close by, a baby was crying.

The queen slid off the couch and onto the floor, landing with a thump. The crying stopped, and she glanced to the side of the couch, where she saw a very small baby, staring at her in shock. It lasted for a blissful moment before it erupted into an extremely high-pitched wail.

Vastras clapped her hands over her ears, wincing, “Astrian.”

The crying stopped as the child was swept up, and Vastras sighed, relaxing. She looked at the Fae cooing and rocking Astrian in her arms, “Aw, whose a hungry little girl? You are! You are!”

Vastras cocked her head, “Are you really treating her as a child?”

Summer turned, her smile vanishing as she looked over, “She is a child, Queen Vastras.”

“What?”

Summer sighed, balancing the babe in the crook of an arm as she sprinkled some yellow dust from her fingers towards the baby’s mouth. “Reincarnation doesn’t mean you’re born knowing your previous life. That’s a skill, it has to be taught. Astrian has a good decade or two before her. Learning. Just like a human child.”

Vastras pushed herself back onto the couch, looking at the scene in front of her in confusion. The baby grabbed Summer’s finger hungrily, and began sucking the dust from her as the queen winced at the bite. So, this was what it was like for a Fae to be reborn. They lost everything, and started over from scratch. Strange. It was somewhat disturbing to look at the little child when she was so recently a rival for the heart of the same man. She couldn’t imagine competing with a baby. That was... Just plain wrong. Maybe that was all gone, too... Well, at least for the next fifteen years or so.

Summer sighed heavily, and sat down on the couch, rolling her wings up behind her, “Sorry, Vastras. Astrian is really damn hungry. Rebirth and all.”

“What does a Fae baby eat?” Vastras asked in confusion, “Nectar? I can’t imagine their digestive tract is hardened yet for leaves.”

Summer winced, “It’s... A bit embarrassing. Dust, is the simple answer. But... We’re mammals still.”

Vastras glanced away cheeks reddening as Summer ditched her shirt, “Ah... How do you decide who... Does the feeding? Just whoever is around?”

Summer grunted painfully and shuffled, “Uh, no. Not really. Usually this can get set up in advance. Someone close to you volunteers or is asked to be your parent. If you were a loner then the Council assigns someone. Generally high ranking. You become their child. Inherit all the rights and responsibilities of their house... I think Astrian would have asked me or Luna. She’s been my mother in a few cycles. I’ve been hers before. Not looking forward to her toddler tantrums again.”

The human glanced sideways and shook her head, “Fae relationships must be... Complicated.”

“I guess.” Summer sighed, “But aren’t human relationships complicated too? I mean... Your

whole world is at war. You having magic must make your life harder.”

Vastras smiled sadly, “Maybe. It certainly has made it longer.”

Luna yawned walked into the room, she glanced over, “Aw. Did baby Astrian come back?”

Summer smiled at her sister, “You didn’t wake up to her cry?”

The princess shrugged, snagging a small pot plant from the windowsill, “Not really.”

Vastras looked at the princess as she nibbled on the herb, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like you haven’t slept.”

Luna glared, “You nearly killed me too, mortal. Rejuvenating is going to take more than one night in a cocoon.”

Summer flinched as Astrian growled without detaching, threatening to cry. “Can you two keep it nice?”

Vastras stood up, stretching, and walked towards the kitchen, “Well, as much as I want to help out with Trei, I’ve also got a kingdom about to be invaded.” She waved her hand over the table, causing a plate stacked with several round and fluffy discs to appear. The queen walked in front of the fire with them, “Your Arbiter has been busy this last year. He’s flared tensions between Calis and three neighbouring nations, and they should be attacking anytime. Mostly because I used the crystal when I was out of my mind and hunting for Trei.”

Luna flopped upside down onto the couch beside her sister, looking up at her, “Seriously, mortal? You have a city. They have nations. Are your people not already dead?”

“I have more magical resources than most.” Vastras shrugged, snapping her fingers and pouring some tree sap over her pancakes from the air, “Much more. I’ve spent a century gathering it.”

Summer sniffed the air, “Maple? Are you serious?”

Vastras blinked in surprise and looked down at her breakfast, “Eh. . . Yes?”

Luna laughed, “She’s jealous.”

“No, I’m hungry.” Summer pouted, looking down, “This one is still going.”

Vastras yawned, “Can you not summon food?”

Summer nodded, “Sure. Once Astrian is done with me. I can’t interrupt the flow of magic when she’s feeding. Some kids are okay with that, not Astrian. She wants your whole attention all to herself.”

As if on cue a little hand reached up and hit Summer’s cheek, making her stop talking.

Luna laughed, grinning, “Oh, I do not miss that.”

Vastras shook her head, a fork appearing in her hand as she ate slowly, watching the strange family. They were a family. Maybe that’s why Trei meant so much to each of them, and why they hadn’t murdered each other over him. They weren’t just a group of unlucky or powerful Fae. They all meant something to each other, they’d spent lifetimes together, forming unbreakable bonds that could survive lifetimes, and death.

She was the outsider here. Maybe it was better that she was about to die.

---

## Luna

Luna glanced over at her sister as she devoured a bowl of flowers hungrily. She was concerned. Since Summer had come back, so many things were different about her, and she hadn't explained why she had yet. The queen had been more than ready to sacrifice her life, but had arrived just in time to finish the second resurrection of Trei. . . And had come back with more power than she'd left with.

Summer paused, picking a rose thorn out of her teeth, "Were your thoughts always that loud, Luna?"

She blushed in embarrassment, and then stared, "You can hear thoughts, now?"

"Temporary." Summer said, and nodded over to the small Fae lying upright in a swirl of blankets on the couch. "I'm connected to Astrian at the moment. Hungry little thing is still feeding off me, even now."

Luna winced, tracing the flow of magic, "She's bleeding your life. That's. . . Weird. And kinda scary."

Summer shrugged, "But. . . To answer you. . . Yio came to tease me. The Fates decided I wasn't supposed to die just yet, which I guess is kinda fair enough. We don't really know what would happen if Summer's soul was destroyed. She let me know she'd lied to Trei, claimed he was part-Fate. Also let me know she'd turned up naked."

Luna clenched her fists, "Then what the hell was she doing here?"

"Attempting to kill Trei." Summer hissed, her wings flaring, "When she couldn't get him to commit suicide, she resorted to using Janus, and attempting to trap me so I couldn't interfere."

The Shadow Knight looked at the hatred burning in her sister's eyes and swallowed, not knowing if she wanted the answer to her next question. "Where is Yio, now?"

"Dead." Summer growled.

Luna looked away, trying to hide her fear, trying to stop from shaking. Her sister had killed a celestial. Not only was that a show of force that Luna hadn't even imagined her sister was even capable of, but it was also something that might upset the fundamental balance of the realms. The will of the celestials is what made existence continue to exist. With one now gone. . . What would happen?

Summer rubbed her temples, "How do you two deal with listening to people's thoughts all day? Seriously, I can't block you out. Yio is dead, so her power rejoins the rest of the celestials. We each got a share. Doesn't do me much good, what with having a physical shell that'll just burn out, but it lets everyone know what happened. That Yio stepped over the line, and paid the price. The treaty stands."

Luna winced, and then looked up, "Wait. If Yio is gone, then who let Janus know when to attack? Did he just trace Trei after we summoned him?"

"No." Summer shook her head, "In fact, I think Janus thought you'd killed Trei. If Vastras wasn't part of it, then you would have. She found a way to take an unravelled soul and reform it again. As to how a mortal queen knows how to do that. . . I'm not sure I want the answer."

Luna glanced over at her bodyguard, watching from the doorway, "Any suggestions?"

Rendi shrugged, placing his hands behind his back, "My lady. That the Arbiter came to retrieve Trei personally is out of character. He has always utilised his networks. I have never, in all

my lifetimes, witnessed him become directly involved in any events, especially not when doing so would upset any of his machinations, such as those he was preparing for the wedding. Something fundamental must have shifted to cause him to break so far from his previous ways.”

Summer shredded a rose petal, “Tyr was here. Right before Trei was taken.”

Luna felt her heart twist inside out, and she looked down, ashamed.

Astrian yawned and snuggled deeper into her cocoon, and the other three looked at her, smiling. At least there was one small ray of sunlight in this whole business. Children had a way of doing that. Taking the hardest and darkest hearts and reigniting them. It helped that Astrian really was an adorable little bundle.

“Tyr came to witness it.” Luna whispered, “Then it means that it was defining point in history. One of the fixed events that can let him draw closer to our reality. So this was always going to happen.”

She stood up, “Rendi, you’re on babysitter duty. Protect Astrian, above and beyond myself.”

Summer raised an eyebrow, “What are you going to do?”

“Raise the knights.” Luna sighed, “Or have you forgotten that you have declared war on the Arbiter?”

Her sister looked as if Luna had sworn at her for a moment, and then sighed, “I’d rather not drag anyone else into this.”

Luna put a hand on her hip, “You don’t get a choice, queen. My realms, and my people, were created to serve a purpose. We will protect the Evening Realms. I am mobilising our forces, and will prepare for whatever is coming. I am the Shadow Knight. Your Shadow Knight. I do not exist to serve your whims, sister. I exist to protect your life. To safeguard the Scion of Sumner. I will not neglect my duty.”

Summer nodded sadly, “I know. I just wish...”

“Yeah.” Luna interrupted angrily, “We all wish we could just run away with Trei. Unfortunately, life happens.”

---

## Trei

Trei watched, unable to move, bound by the chains encircling his wrists, feet and neck as the Fae slumped to the ground in front of him. He winced as he saw the man trying to scream, but all that emerged was black sludge as the man coughed and screamed, dying as his insides liquefied. Drowning in his own flesh.

The perpetrator sighed, kicking aside the dead body as if it weighed nothing. They took a seat, looking at him intently, “Now that we’ve dealt with that, how about you and I have a little conversation?”

He glared, lifting his chains, “I assume these are your doing?”

The woman nodded stiffly, “Of course. I’d hardly be willing to risk the strength of a ghou, and the anger of a man who does not yet fully understand his situation. They’re temporary. It’ll take some time to explain how we ended up here.”

Trei leaned against the rough blue stone wall, “Get started. I doubt Summer is going to give you long.”

“For starters, Yio did lie to you, yes. You’re not part Fate. Yio is also dead. Sumner killed her.” The woman paused trying to bury her anger and reappear the calm and considerate host, “But you aren’t human. Not really. I’m not certain if you ever were.”

He flexed his wrists against the chains, wincing as he felt a sudden heat scorch him. “Yeah, not liking where this is going.”

“Yio lied.” The woman sighed, “You were dragged into this by Sumner, and so were we all. Even your little mortal friend.”

Trei glared, “Vastras? She dragged herself into this.”

“No, sorry.” The woman replied, yawning, “The mortal stole her power from Sumner, a couple thousand years ago. In a sense, she bound her soul to Sumner’s. All Fae are bound to Sumner. Sumner truly is your... What is the word mortals use? Soulmate? Your soul is a perfect fit for hers, and so you were bound. It was true fate that caused Sumner to resurrect you. Unfortunately, any soul bound to Sumner then became bound to you. Including Yio.”

He considered her. It did make some sense. Summer was the goddess of the Fae, or something along those lines. But he’d been pulled in before. And he’d ended up having his soul nearly destroyed by the man lying dead on the floor. He wasn’t in a trusting mood. Especially not to someone who had him kidnapped and put in magical chains.

She shrugged, “I don’t need you to accept what I’m saying. I just need you to understand, mortal. To understand why you need to leave the Evening Realms and never return.”

Trei glared, and the woman continued, “It is not possible for a Fae to imprint on a mortal. Sumner imprinting on you was the first time. The reasons became obvious rather quickly with just a tad of research. Your mother, she died when you were very young, did she not?”

He flinched, “You don’t get to talk about her.”

“I must.” The woman retorted, waiting patiently as Trei strained against his chains, feeling them scorch his wrists. “Your mother was Valis, was she not?”

Trei stopped, sighing heavily and slid down the wall onto the ground. Instantly regretting it as the stone dug into his back. “Yes.”



“She was a servant, in the household of Vinadras.” The woman stated flatly, not waiting for confirmation, “Do you know his work?”

Trei sighed, glaring at the chains, “Lord Vinadras. He was a mage, experimenting with... Longevity. So far as I know, he died young from heart failure. He made a few gemstones and runes that are supposed to extend your life, but have a habit of exploding. I don’t think anyone has ever found a way to make his work stable... But I’m not a mage. I don’t know that stuff.”

The woman grunted a confirmation, “Vinadras was an idiot. His magic was flawed. It would never work, and he knew it. He was attempting to turn a mortal soul into an eternal one. That sort of magical binding can’t be contained by any gemstone. The magic is too complex. He did have a plan underway to correct that, when he died.”

Trei sighed. He had been born on the street. His mother, homeless. So he really was Vinadras’ child then. A vessel for his magic. Just another experiment. “So a mage was my father. So what?”

“Not Vinadras.” The woman retorted, “Vinadras’ soul was not eternal. He supplied the physical makeup for you, true enough, but he perverted your soul, whilst you were unborn. He bound you to an eternal soul. You were his attempt to create an immortal.”

Trei glanced up, “Please. Don’t.”

“Vinadras stole the essence of an eternal from another mage.” The woman continued, “From Vastras.”

Trei winced, closing his eyes. He was bound to Summer, because his soul had been created from hers. That explanation fit. Disturbingly well. “So why does this mean I have to go?”

“Because you are a target.” The woman growled angrily, “And when you die, and you will die, it will destroy a piece of Sumner’s soul. It will unbalance the celestials. The Fae will lose control as their core is rocked. Sumner will not survive your death. She will break. The pain of your death will be irreversible. It will lead to madness. Your eternal soul marks you out like a beacon to the enemies of Sumner. Even that useless sack over there barely needed prompting before he found a way to trace you. You have the essence of a god in you, but not the power to defend yourself as one.”

He sighed, glaring, “You want me to run, because if I get hurt, Summer will make them pay?”

“She will destroy this world. All worlds. She killed a Fate, mortal! For threatening you. No Fate has ever died before. No celestial would dare to kill another, except now, Sumner is willing to destroy us all for you. She will go to war with the heavens when you die, and it is when. You are still human. You may have been resurrected, but your death remains inevitable. Your soul is not eternal. Hers is. It may take a billion lifetimes, but she will still destroy all life when you die.”

He shrugged, “I guess that means she’ll kill you.”

---

## Luna

Luna felt the ice crunch beneath her feet as she landed softly on the frost-laden grass of her home. Her gaze swept the forest quickly, watching the shadows. These were her people, her guardians and her creations. Weapons forged for war, people crafted into merciless means of destruction. She had perverted them, and stolen hope from them. They were not, nor could they ever be, creatures of peace.

She paused, pursing her lips. There were more than they should be.

Not even the armies she'd stolen from the Arbiter would explain the discrepancy. Nor could a rebellion breeding in secret.

"Well, then. Would you like some tea?" She asked scornfully, indicating her cottage.

The air shivered and unravelled, revealing a female Fae, her eyes were a brilliant red, as was her hair. The creature eyed her, "Knight."

"This is my realm." Luna replied with a yawn, "You will respect my title, Madam Claven."

The Fae bowed sarcastically, "Princess Luna."

She turned her back on the woman deliberately and headed for her cottage, "Will you join me, Madam?"

She heard a hiss of outrage from the Fae, but it suddenly choked off as Luna snapped her fingers. There was a series of screams, followed by silence. The beasts that Claven had brought with her were gone. Eliminated by those who truly knew war, and the intelligence required to fight a battle.

She entered the house, leaving the door ajar.

Luna stretched and flicked a finger, igniting her fire. She sat down, sinking into the armchair comfortably.

Claven stood in the doorway, eyes wide with rage and horror, and Luna smiled, indicating another armchair, "I assume you have some point to make, Madam. You are on the Council, true enough, but I doubt that they have sanctioned your actions here. Not with the Arbiter standing against our Queen."

The red haired woman sat down slowly, flinching as a male Fae appeared carrying a teacup and kettle. He poured it absent-mindedly, as Claven glanced from him and back to her, "How did he hide in here?"

Luna rolled her eyes, "He did not hide, Madam. Enri has ever served me dutifully. He waited, inside this cottage. Waited for you and I to sit and speak to one another. Because, Madam, Enri does know the limits of my ability... And you clearly do not. A hundred shades? Ten were greater shades, yes... But that's all you bring to try and threaten me?"

Luna turned up her nose, glaring, "You have deeply insulted me. Tell me, Madam Claven, do you remember Hero? The war he waged against our people and how many he killed?"

Claven glanced down into her tea, a quiet stillness passing over her form, "Yes, Princess Luna."

"Who was it who slayed him, Madam Claven?"

The red-haired Fae's wings curled up, and the glow of dust on her skin faded, "He was struck down by your hand."

“And mine alone.” Luna growled angrily, “Whilst Queen Summer watched, unassisting. I am not some petty noble you can dispose of with a season of rearing monsters from black dust... Which also an insult. The dust is mine. I let you have it.”

Claven nodded silently, the fire seemingly sucked out of her.

“Now, little Faeling, tell me why you have attacked.” Luna snapped.

Claven flinched, suddenly seeming on the verge of tears. “I was instructed. The army... Their original purpose was to guard my fields. To protect them, against Janus.”

Luna blinked, and leaned forward, “Ash. The Fates came to you, didn’t they? Demanding me head?”

Claven nodded nervously, a single tear running from her eye. Luna smiled darkly, “Well, I expect they thought I’d just kill you and be done with it. I guess you can consider yourself one lucky little Faeling then.”

Claven looked at her with a touch of hatred, “Continue calling me a Faeling.”

Luna shrugged, “I might. Not much you can do about it. Though, that does remind me of something you might care about. You were friends with Astrian once, were you not?”

Claven nodded quietly, still staring at the warm drink in her hands.

“She’s been reborn.” Luna said, her voice going quiet and sad, “Summer is nursing her. If you’d like to re-establish that friendship.”

Claven jerked her head up, “Already? She was not halfway through her cycle!”

Luna nodded grimly, “Astrian burned out. I nearly did, too, to be honest. The Fates tried to kill the future-husband of our Queen.”

Claven bared her fangs, “They force me to attack you. And they attack that which is our Queen’s? What are they doing? They’ve broken the treaty.”

“Treaties are politics in the end.” Luna shrugged, “Sometimes crap happens.”

The red-haired Fae shook her head, “The celestials. Something terrible is -”

“Has happened.” Luna cut her off, “I am mobilising my forces, Faeling. Janus has kidnapped Trei. The Queen has declared war.”

Claven stared at her wide-eyed, and then swallowed nervously, “You know the Queen’s husband?”

Luna nearly kicked herself. Of all the bombshells, the stupid wench had noticed that one? That she liked Trei?

“I have done my duty by him.”

Claven grinned showing her fangs, “Oh my. Now isn’t this surprising. You actually have a heart, dear princess.”

“I will eat yours gladly, if you continue.” Luna shot back casually, and then waved to Enri, “Could you issue the general order?”

The butler bowed and disappeared, and Claven glanced over at him in surprise, “That was too fast for a shift. Having you been hiding secret magic?”

“No.” Luna yawned, “That was a channel. I’ve placed a few thousand throughout my realms. Convenient way to travel for a military force. Quiet and fast, if somewhat disorienting if you haven’t trained to use them.”

Claven flinched, sighing heavily, “So what is my fate to be, Princess Luna?”

“I haven’t decided.” She yawned, glancing at the woman, “I guess, for now, you are a prisoner of war. You have committed treason. The Queen will probably wish to decide your fate, as you acted on the behest of her enemies. She might let you off lightly, all things considered. But if you irritate me, I’ll make sure you never rejoin the lifestream.”

Claven shivered and nodded silently. The message got through her thick skull, then.

“Enri is going to be busy.” Luna considered, “Why don’t you stay here, and clean up the cottage? It’ll give me time to construct an appropriate prison for you. Sleep in front of the fire.”

She stood up, walking towards her bedroom, and wondering why she’d been so soft on a Fae who had just attempted to kill her.

It felt strange. Even the Fae’s quiet sobs behind her elicited some kind of sympathy inside her.

---

## Summer

Summer glared across the room, hands on her hips, “Come here, now.”

“No!” Came a hiss, followed by a thrown pillow. Summer glared, and the pillow exploded with a puff of feathers, “Astrian! I will not ask you again!”

The Fae hissed from her perch atop of the couch, spreading her claws.

Summer pointed at an upside down bowl of leaves on the ground, “Now.”

The Faeling growled angrily, sinking onto the ground slowly. She waddled across the ground, arms crossed.

The queen breathed a sigh of relief, right before Astrian kicked the bowl.

She tensed up, biting back a hail of curse words, “Pick up the bowl, Astrian. That isn’t how we express our anger.”

A flood of angry and violent thoughts hit her face. Summer sighed heavily, crouching down, “Astrian. I know you’re frustrated. You just need to put the bowl away.”

The Faeling flooded her with my thoughts and emotions, attempting to overwhelm her. Summer tried very hard not to smile at the assault, who knew a Faeling could be this skilled with magic? She seemed to be picking things up faster this cycle.

Summer paused, waving a tracer spell quickly, and she winced, “Astrian?”

The Faeling cocked her head, her expression softening, “No?”

Summer frowned, examining the structures of her mind carefully, “Something is different about you, Astrian. You still have the mind of a Faeling... But... You’ve retained some memories of your previous life. How is that possible?”

“No?” Astrian asked, starting to looking afraid.

Summer patted her head gently, “You’re okay. Just put the bowl away.”

Astrian stamped a foot, hissing, “No!”

---

## Vastras

The politician paused uncertainly as he saw her glaring down at him. "I'm sorry, Queen Vastras. You appear to be injured. Perhaps another time would be better."

She shrugged, touching her eye patch gently, and feeling the reddened skin around her empty socket, "A brush with the Fae. Little to be concerned with Lord Azrael. Please, continue. You were about to tell me why Ozandius was positioning ten thousand troops just beyond our barrier. And why that is not a breach of the peace treaty between our peoples."

The man sighed heavily, clearly torn. Understandable in a way. When she was younger she had been a friend and mentor to the young man, when he still dreamed of being a paladin, a future that had been denied him when all six of his older brothers had been assassinated by a rival nation. He alone had survived, and not of his own doing. It had been her hand that protected him.

And now the crown prince was here to offer a deceleration of war and demand surrender.

Vastras smiled, and waved a hand, "Come, Lord Azrael. Your father has decided to remove a thorn in his side. This need not be a question of personal loyalties. Deliver the terms. You are, and ever shall be, my friend. Whatever comes."

The man nodded grimly, "I'm afraid, oh generous Queen, that King Iza offers no terms. No negotiations. Unconditional surrender, or utter decimation."

A flicker of anger passed over the queen seated on her silver throne, and her eyes narrowed. She leaned forward, her hair spilling over her shoulders, "Pay careful attention, Lord Azrael. Deliver my words exactly as I speak them. Calis is a free city. Her peoples are free, and serve no one, not even myself. By this spirit of freedom, she is protected. No man may demand that which this city can offer, and none deserve it. No king shall set foot in these lands with violence in heart without having his dreams torn asunder. If violence is brought against Calis by incredible force, then a cataclysm of apocalyptic proportions shall be visited upon those who have caused it."

Azrael sighed heavily bowing, "I shall deliver your words."

Vastras stood quickly, "Hold a moment."

He frowned as she stepped down from her throne, and plucked a white rose from the air. She walked over quietly and tucked it into his breast pocket, "I have not forgotten the kindness, nor impudence, of my student. How have you survived?"

Azrael shook his head, "This would not be appropriate, your Highness."

Vastras rolled her eye, "I just battled a Fate for the soul of a dead man. Nearly lost, in fact. The petty concerns over land borders and the constant desire to weaponize magic isn't exactly my highest priority, Lord Azrael. There are much worse things in our worlds than mere kings."

He smiled grimly, "You lost your eye to a Fae. I thought they avoided interfering in our worlds. The Paladins have certainly not clashed with them in a hundred years or so."

"That may change. There is a certain Fae attempted to usurp the throne of the Evening Realms. One of his tools attempted to drive me insane. I lost an eye, but gained a new magic." She shrugged, smiling at her pupil, "Not a terrible outcome, all things considered."

Azrael nodded grimly, "Things have been... Unsettled, lately."

His words were cautious, he'd obviously been instructed to tell her nothing. Yet, in his own way, he was letting her know. The Borderlands, on the edge of Ozandius were tainted. Too many

battles had been fought there, too much magic had been cast and torn apart. It had corrupted reality, leaving it a mess of anomalies and strange unstable dimensional rifts. Azrael was letting her know the problem was getting worse.

“The Fates have broken a celestial treaty, of sorts.” Vastras replied tiredly, “All the worlds are... Unsettled.”

The ex-paladin flinched, turning to her, “You are certain of this?”

“Sumner has been attacked.” Vastras replied, “The usurper is backed by Yio, and perhaps the other sisters.”

Azrael ground his teeth, one of his hands instinctively reaching for the hilt of a sword that wasn't there, “This is not well, your Highness.”

“This petty war your father would have...” She shook her head, “It could not come at a worse time. Perhaps you might, in some small way, get him to re-examine his connection to Janus.”

Azrael looked at her sideways, “Is that a general you believe he trusts?”

“Of sorts.” Vastras smiled, “He'll know the name. He won't be happy I know it too.”

The prince shook his head, “You always did pull me in to the worst of things, didn't you?”

She grinned, elbowing him, “Come now. Are you saying you regret when we closed the Eye? Or burned the Entrens?”

He went silent, looking down. The prince was silent for a time, and he didn't look back at her when he spoke. “I do. I regret much, your Highness.”

That stung. So Azrael really had changed. Had come to hate her for what they had done... It hadn't all been glamorous, and most of it had been world-threateningly dangerous. She had taught him more forbidden magic than most people would ever encounter. Not the best start for a holy knight. Yet, she had done it to keep him alive. Maybe now he wished instead that he had died. That he had never met her.

That the quiet mage had never stumbled across a knight bleeding out on a valley floor whilst an elf had stood over them, ready to deliver the final blow.

That he had never heard her speak a forbidden word.

That she had never turned the elf to ash.

Vastras nodded silently, “Return to your king, m'lord. He will be awaiting you anxiously.”

---

## Claven

Claven sniffed the air cautiously, her wings stiffly creaking as they untwisted from around her. Her hands grabbed her dress from over her shoulder and slipped it on as she peered around herself nervously. The room was still dark, and quiet. The coals in the fireplace were still glowing, but barely. There was a frost outside.

“Tea, madam?”

She spun around with a frightened hiss, staring at the butler who had seemingly appeared from no where. He placed a silver tray beside her on the ground, with a steaming cup of tea and a bowl of freshly ground herbs. He stood stiffly and glanced around the room, “I would expect our Lady will be quite thorough in examining your work. Do not take long to get started.”

Claven sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping. There was no escaping this.

She was the prisoner of the Lady Luna, and if she tried to escape or fight back, then her world would end. The woman was simply so much more powerful than she’d expected. So much more prepared for any kind of threat. Her servants could come and go without warning here.

The butler sighed heavily, “Drink your tea. It will calm your nerves, madam.”

Then he was gone, without a movement or sparkle of magic. Just vanished. A hidden channel, Luna had said. Maybe it was true. Hard to tell.

She picked up the cup, letting the heat soak into her hands, and she glanced over at the window to the outside. It was still dark, and so cold. Her wings were stiff and tight, but she doubted she’d get to catch enough sunshine in weather like this to fully rejuvenate. She’d be limited to the food and drink, starved of her own dust. A perpetually weakened state.

“That’s not intentional.”

She turned, glaring at the voice, and saw Luna lounging at a nearby table, feet crossed and sitting on the edge of it. The Fae waved, smiling, “Glad to see you’re awake. I was beginning to get worried you’d forgotten the work.”

Claven looked down at her tea, “I have not forgotten, your Ladyship.”

“Mistress will do.” Luna laughed through a mouthful of food.

“Yes, mistress.” Claven said, struggling not to cry. She really was a slave. All because of the Fates. Being forced into this war between her own people and the celestials. The world was falling apart. Her world was over, destroyed and derailed in an instant.

“Careful.” Luna’s voice whispered in her ear, one hand steadying her wrist, and Claven looked up in surprise at the Fae’s face, now gentle. Luna smiled at her softly, “We’ve all got a lot on our plates. Consider this, madam. If you are here, a prisoner in my home, then you are being kept from the frontlines of this war. Here you will not be killed, unless the war is already lost. You failed the Fates. They will not be taking that lightly, even though the task they set you was impossible.”

Claven nodded. She was weak. Yet here Luna was, protecting her in some small way, despite everything she had done.

It was a surprise, coming from the Shadow Knight, the ruthless protector of the realms.

Luna grinned at her, showing off her fangs, “Oh, I wouldn’t say I’m all that kind.”

Claven flinched, shivering, “Have you always read thoughts, mistress?”



Luna yawned, standing up, “Mostly. I’m not as good as Astrian. Just general impressions and ideas. That girl could turn your head inside out and drop you inside your own worst nightmare before you realised she was even taking a look at your mind.”

Claven sipped the warm tea, feeling the swirl of nectar and tea ignite her throat. “I’m not a powerful Fae, or even particularly gifted.”

Luna looked at her with exasperation, “You’re on the Council. You’re gifted.”

“At memory recall.” Claven retorted, “I can recall my past lives more clearly than most. It makes for a good archivist. Not much else.”

The princess picked up her breakfast, kicking a spark into the fireplace to rekindle it, “So? Knowledge is a dangerous thing. Your knowledge is useful.”

“The Arbiter didn’t think so.” Claven replied bitterly, “He never even approached me to help him.”

Luna considered for a moment, “Well, maybe you should be happy about that. Bastard tortured me when I didn’t accept.”

Claven glared at her, “I’m not convinced your sister should lead us, mistress.”

Luna shot her a look of death, and then spoke slowly, “She has proven her worth, lifetime after lifetime. Janus is the ass that kidnaps, tortures, assassinates and annexes. He’s a violent one.”

“So were we, once.” Claven hissed, “The Fae were a proud people, once. Powerful and strong. We conquered other realms... Now we barely even react amongst ourselves when we lose what belongs to us.”

Luna grinned at her, “Well, my sister you think is so weak has declared war against Janus. War is returning to the realms. Perhaps you’ll see enough of it to remember why our people abandoned violence and sought peace. Or maybe you’ll just die.”

---

## Summer

Summer stood in front of those of the Council who could gather. Half of them were missing, already working for her. This was just a formal procedure, moving through the motions.

The Faeling attached to her head tensed, digging her claws in Summer's scalp. Astrian was certainly proving to be more attached this time around. Summer sighed heavily, her wings drooping, "Honoured members, as of fourteen hours ago, I have invoked my right as Queen."

The Council looked at her grimly, most already knowing what was coming. Some shifted uncomfortably, their loyalties clearly lying elsewhere. Which was the problem. Summer knew that this would mean war, a civil war. Fae against Fae. Brother against brother, sister against sister. No family would remain undivided. Being forced to choose between the embodiment of their goddess, and the hero who had protected them against countless threats.

It was worse. Summer was supposed to be marrying one of those threats, a mortal. Janus attacking and kidnapping him would be seen as a patriotic move by so many of those that worshipped the light shining out his ass crack. There was nothing she could offer them. No reason not to join the Arbiter in a brilliant and chaotic movement that would restore the Evening Realms to their former glory.

Summer glared sideways as she felt the perceptual shift, and she saw Tyr standing there, leaning against a wall as he watched impassionately.

"I have declared a state of war." She spoke, her voice threatening to crack. An unwelcome sign of weakness.

One of the Councillors held up a hand, "Excuse me, your Highness, but how can that be? The mortals have not invaded us. There is no insurrection. With whom are you going to war?"

"There is insurrection." Summer growled angrily, as Astrian hissed from atop her head, "Janus served the Fates, and conspired with them to interfere in my affairs."

The man swallowed nervously, not expecting such a brutally direct answer, "Do you have proof of this?"

"Yio is dead." Summer replied simply, "Her sentence has been carried out. The man who was Arbiter, shall soon join her. If you continue to supply weapons, food and dust to the forces hiding in Gallan's realm, Lord Dal, you will be considered a traitor."

The man paled, freezing as if rooted to the spot. Summer glared around the room, "I am your Queen. I do not require your support to take this action. Nor do I require your help in bringing the coming battles to an end. I killed Yio, and I alone. If any of you wish to challenge my right to rule in the old way, do so. I will be waiting. I have been gentle, and I have been kind to this Council. I gave the Arbiter far more leeway than a man who attempts to usurp a throne deserves. No longer. He has taken my bride. For that alone I would be justified in taking his head as a prize. Yet more than that, he involved the celestials and took actions that broke our treaty with them. I have no need for your weapons, supplies or tactics. I have my Shadow Knight. Stay out of my way. Keep your people safe."

"I challenge." One of the councillors said, rising. He was old, and his hand shook as he drew his sword, "I will be a slave of Sumner no longer!"

Summer considered him carefully, and stepped atop the table and gestured to him, "I will not insult you by refusing your right to challenge, Lord Ashwith."

Another Fae leapt onto the table, standing between them, she stared at him in horror, "M'lord! You must not!"

Summer placed a hand on her shoulder gently, "Nor may you, Lady Ashwen. A challenge has been issued. Neither of us may interfere with it."

The young Fae woman stepped aside, biting her hand nervously, and the lord stepped towards her, pointing his sword, "The Faeling."

Summer smiled at him, "Astrian is in no danger, sir. You may proceed."

He frowned, dubious and then slashed towards her. The blade broke apart in the air as it came close to her, the fragments floating in a spiral around her. Summer shook her head sadly, "The blade was poisoned, Lord Ashwith. Who was it that gave you this?"

The man stared in horror, "Poison?"

Summer pushed a fragment gently with a gust of wind, letting it float in front of him. "Observe the purple colouration at the edge of the blade. Gingerbane, if I'm not mistaken. Painful, and fast."

The lord dropped the broken hilt to the tabletop, and fell onto his knees, "I'm sorry."

The rest of the blade fragments dropped onto the tabletop with a clatter and Summer nodded slowly, "So am I, Lord Ashwith. You know the laws that command us. The ones you have invoked. I must either break our laws, or kill an innocent man sent by a coward."

Ashwith looked up at her, passion burning in his grey eyes, "No. You must avenge my death, at the hands of the coward who sent me. My blood is upon him, and not you, my queen."

Summer crouched, touching his face gently, "Then speak this traitor's name."

"Janus."

There was a crack and the man slumped backwards onto the table, and Summer stood again, turning to the woman who had so often been a daughter to the lord who would now never be reborn. "Lady Ashwen. I grant you the titles and lands of the late Lord Ashwith. Do with them as you will."

She stepped down from the table, and walked forward, opening a rift in the air in front of her. Astrian hissed backwards at the room.

There was no room for doubt, now.

She was their queen, and this was war.

---

## Vastras

Vastras walked into her laboratory, flicking her wrist. The thrown bag of dust exploded against a crystalline pillar, igniting it. Lights flickered and began appearing all around the cave, revealing the gem-studded walls and floors.

The magic groaned and screamed as the stored spells began to activate, one by one. Hundreds of years of planning and preparations began to launch into motion, an unstoppable force of her own nature.

The mage smiled grimly, and tossed aside her eye patch as she picked up a smooth white stone. She breathed on it carefully, letting the sigil glow for a brief moment before she pushed her spell against it. She felt the drain against her own supply of mana as the stone warped, shaking as it were made of something less than solid. It melted in her hand suddenly, before curving upwards into a perfect sphere.

Vastras winced as she pushed it into her eye socket and felt the magic lance outwards and crash into her nerves. She blinked rapidly as the world swam into view. A different kind of view. Her mind struggled, hurting, as it tried to overlap the two visions. One of the physical world, and one of the magical dimensions.

The mage turned and punched violently, splitting her hand against the crystal that took pride of place. She whistled through her teeth as the bones shattered and split the skin, bleeding over the object. A soft black light began to emanate from inside the towering column, and Vastras wiped her blood across the surface, quickly writing a simple sigil. A protection spell, of sorts.

She stepped back, and then turned her attention elsewhere, using her new eye to find the paths between the worlds, to watch the trails of those who used them. She wrenched open one of the doorways and stepped through, arriving in the dripping rain forest.

In front of her was a natural spring, and the person bathing in it jumped, staring at her in terror.

Vastras smiled grimly, "I have come to collect the debt you owe me, elf."

The woman held her hands in a protested modesty, and stared at her, "I will not do anything that will endanger my world. I am bound, but there are limits."

"You owe me." Vastras replied, "That is all I care about."

The elf stood up, stepping awkwardly out of the spring. There was a flutter as the water dripping off her and the rain falling from above were repelled, and the elf slid into her dress quickly and turned, "Well, mage. What is your demand?"

She smiled at her, "You can start by finding someone for me."

---

## Azrael

Azrael screamed out an order as the hairs on the backs of his arms stood on end, but it was too late.

The first two lines of charging cavalry vanished like smoke as they crashed into the invisible barrier, and he flinched. There was a moment of chaos as the cavalry split, trying to regroup, whilst the mages waiting by the city walls continued their barrage of stone and fire. Horses and men screamed as they vanished into the earth in shockingly loud explosions of dust and debris.

He swung down from his horse, walking forward through the lines slowly, as the soldiers parted for him. The enemy hurled attacks in his direction, but they vanished before they stuck him. He was a paladin, a holy knight, consecrated to the service of a god, in this case, a goddess. As such, divine power flowed through him, tearing apart the heretical magical attacks.

He stood, looking at the barrier that no one could see, and traced his sword blade against the edge, watching the way it deconstructed, and how the energy flowed from the sword and into the barrier. A self-reinforcing spell. One of the most basic and effective of wards. However, this kind of ward wasn't commonly used to defend much more than a person because of how much magic was needed to maintain it. There were only a few possibilities that explained how it could be in use here.

There might be a circle of mages, somewhere in the town, maintaining a vigil, passing the harness for the magic from one to another. If that was the case then all that was needed was a series of attacks against the barrier that would exhaust their combined magic. The trebuchets would be erected in a couple hours, and would serve that purpose effectively.

However, he knew Vastras. She depended upon no one but herself.

No... She'd found a way to store enough magic to maintain this barrier herself. This was not some mage projecting a spell against their forces, it was an automated defence. The spell was fixed, rather than dynamic. This kind of sealing of spells usually made them stronger, but it also made them degrade quicker, draining whatever stored magic was linked against them. It also made them vulnerable, by creating a fixed point in the spell. A part of the spell that looked harder to break, but was in fact more fragile.

He stepped back from the barrier, and sheathed his damaged sword. He flexed his fingers in their metal gauntlets, and then snapped his hands together with an earth-shattering crash of metal. The ground rolled out around him in every direction, crashing against the barrier and highlighting the shape of the matrix that held the spell together. He saw the origin clearly now. A fixed point, a sigil of protection, highlighted at the root of the spell.

The paladin leaned down onto one knee, and closed his eyes and raised his hands. He felt the blessing of the goddess flow through him, a violent river of lava surfing through his soul and crashing against the sigil. He felt his hair standing on end, static flickering between each fibre. The sigil seemed to be growing stronger as the enormous flow of power crashed into the surface. This was what he was waiting for, what he was expecting.

The paladin felt his raised arms beginning to tremble, the muscles cramping and tearing as the magic tore at his physical shell, trying to release his soul and drag him into the endless river of life. The protection sigil cracked suddenly, spidering out quickly.

Azrael fell backwards onto the ground, sweating heavily inside his armour. He knew that some of the liquid rolling off him was blood, rather than just salt water. That was the price he paid.

The man stood up shakily, feeling drained as the blessing of the goddess subsided, granting him his life. He raised a hand, and gestured. The cavalry charged past him in a flurry, and he snagged

the saddle as his own horse flew past, landing atop it in a single fluid movement. He glared through the narrow slit in his visor as he saw the mages begin to panic as they realised their first protection was gone.

---

## Ashwen

Lady Ashwen froze, and then moved her hands behind her quickly as she realised she'd been gnawing on them again. It was a nervous habit, suited to a young woman, but not to a Councillor, who now ruled six realms.

Her red-tinged wings fluttered nervously as she looked at the messenger in front of her, a Fae dressed in black, whose eyes seemed to be empty of life. He sighed heavily, "Your response, ladyship?"

She didn't want to have to decide. Didn't want to act. She didn't want to have to choose sides, to have to fight her own people. Death was eternal. To kill another... It was horrifying. She was still reeling from how easily her father had accepted his fate, and how brutal the Queen's execution had been. Yet here she was, with a lackey of the Arbiter demanding her loyal obedience, like her father before her.

Her father had been tricked. To try and force him to kill the Queen in dishonourable conduct.

Yet... The Queen was a vicious, violent creature that killed and bragged about her conquests. She'd killed a Fate, and claimed it was her right to do so.

She wanted neutrality, to keep her people out of this. But she knew neither of them would allow it. Not with so many lands, resources and people under her rule. She would be forced to choose a side, or to fight everyone. There was no way out of this without violence. Without death.

Ashwen tried not to bite her lip, and glared, "I will not speak to some servant. If the Lord Arbiter requires my assistance, then he will be the one to require it. He well knows that as Lord Ashwith died in a challenge, all his contracts are dissolved. I have no requirement to follow a contract I have not seen. I would be willing to forge one, with the Lord Arbiter, but I must have my due first."

The man nodded, and then shifted. He would carry the message to his leader, and all she could do was hope that Janus wouldn't take it as an invitation to have her killed. Or worse. Like invade her homeland and force the horrors of war on all of them.

---

## Trei

Trei opened his eyes tiredly, feeling his stomach growling.

He dragged an angry hand across the ground, marking another day in his cell. This was his third sunrise. He raised his chains weakly. The woman keeping him here hadn't come back. She wasn't torturing him like Janus would. She'd simply abandoned him to rot. His new body wasn't rotting, it was living, in some way... But it was alive, and that meant it needed something to stay that way.

He stretched out a toe, groaning as he reached for the beam of light at the extreme limit of his range. He sucked in his breath painful as he touched the edge, and felt a rapid warmth spread across him. It didn't fill him, and didn't make the hunger go away - in fact it made it worse. But, it stopped him getting a lot weaker. That was his only goal, for now. To stay alive. To survive.

He didn't have the strength to break chains designed for a rabid ghoul when he was this weak. He couldn't fight back. He didn't know enough magic to do anything useful. He knew the restoration magic that Astrian had taught him, but there was nothing left for him to suck the life out of.

He glanced over at the pile of bones and clothes by the wall. That had been the first thing he'd absorbed, before trying to break free. The body of Janus. Somehow, that had seemed to make his strength drain even quicker.

Trei nestled his head against the stone in his usual place, and looked up at the ceiling, fighting back tears. It was hard to keep the thoughts of failure at bay. No one had come for him. He didn't know if they would, or could.

His bravado about Summer coming in a blaze of glory was gone now. If she could find him, she would have been here a long time ago. If she still wanted to. He'd divided them, in one of his last moments. Proposing to Summer like that, in front of the others. He couldn't deny it. He liked Astrian, and he'd enjoyed flirting with Luna. Heck, even Vastras made him feel protective. But Summer... He'd fallen for her from the first moment he'd seen her. That regal and mythical creature, sitting by a well, drinking tea. She was the idea of beauty turned into physical form, and given the soul of a warrior.

She was his ideal.

He'd never deserved someone like that.

He didn't deserve her.

He was just another failed experiment of a failed mage.

He closed his eyes, giving in and sinking into the feeling.

---



## Summer

Summer flinched as the doctor tore another crystal out of her skin with her tweasers, dropping the blood-drenched stone into the nearby tray with a clink. The woman looked up at her queen with concern, “You should have called me earlier.”

Summer gritted her teeth as another gemstone was torn free of her arm, “I wasn’t sure my body would reject the changes.”

The doctor shook her head, and picked up her scalpel, nodding to her nurse that pushed aside the blood with a tiny focused channel of wind, “We might use crystals to photosynthesise at some level, my queen, but the Faen physical shell is a delicately balanced instrument. I’m rather shocked you’ve survived this long. How much of your frame did you infect with this magic?”

Summer hissed with pain as the scalpel dug into a muscle, “Most of it. I was nearly reabsorbed. I didn’t have a lot of choices out there, doctor.”

The Fae rolled her eyes and held up a crystal shard the size of a Faeling’s fist. “This seems to be a worse choice.”

Summer glared, “Step into the lifestream or attempt to reforge my shell into something tougher.”

The doctor shook her head and turned her attention back to the gaping arm, focusing, “I will do my best to keep you alive.”

The queen looked over at Astrian mindlessly playing with a butterfly, and tried to ignore the pain as the two worked to remove the crystals from her. They couldn’t remove most of them, she needed them to speak, and to think. But it was obvious. She was going to die. Just a matter of time now, rather than a question.

That brought a flood of questions to her mind, and a myriad of worries. She couldn’t afford to die with Janus flaunting his power, and even if she won, and got everything she wanted. . . She would die, and become a child again, whilst her bride. . . How would he react? Could their relationship survive more than one lifetime? Few friendships could. Did she even have a chance?

No. She knew it. She would die, and Trei would mourn. . . And then either Vastras or Luna would claim him in time. Summer would be forced to grow up, whilst loving a man she could never have.

Imprinting was a curse. There were no upsides, not in the lifecycle of a Fae.

The doctor leaned back tiredly, stretching, “I think I’ve got most of them from that arm. I’ll stitch you up, and then give you a break. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Summer nodded absent-mindedly, and turned her gaze to the ceiling.

So her chance at happiness really was gone.

Then it was time to do something stupid.

She looked sideways at the bloodied pile of crystals and smiled softly.

---

## Vastras

Vastras stepped through the gateway after the elf, smiling as the two of them arrived in a run-down castle of sorts.

They were still in the mortal realm, technically, but not quite. She could tell as soon as she stepped in that the place was out of sync with the rest of the world. This was a pocket dimension, the kind of spell that no mortal had ever managed to pull off without causing unending damage. This was the kind of magic that had made her into who she was. The arrogance of it, and the way it tore apart lives as if they'd never mattered in the first place.

The pink-haired woman in the room spun, but froze as a spear touched her throat gently. The elf met her gaze, cool eyes without concern or hesitation.

Vastras smiled, "F'rir. Allow me to introduce to you a friend of mine. Well, she owed me a favour. You're it. Or rather, the man you're holding prisoner is."

The Fate clenched her fists angrily, glaring over at her, "Mage."

Vastras yawned, "Where's Trei?"

"The mortal cannot be allowed to return to the Evening Realms!" F'rir protested angrily, "Please, mage. Even you must know the risk he creates by his mere presence."

"Of course." She replied, "That is why I helped Vinadras create him, after all."

F'rir turned a sickly shade of white and stared at her, "What are you saying, mortal?"

"I'm saying that Trei is a weapon." Vastras growled, beginning to walk towards the Fate, "A weapon designed to unbalance the celestials. A weapon created to take the power you lord over us and tear it out of your cold dead hands. I'm saying that the fate of Trei is set in stone. He was born to end you. To cause the celestials to kill each other."

F'rir didn't say anything. The Fate was at a lost for words, the horror of the truth etched into her face.

Vastras sighed heavily, "I created Trei, to kill you all. Genocide. I couldn't see another way to do it. I will use him, and he will be the catalyst that leads to all of your kind being wiped out... And then I will take the lifestream for my own and I will finally end the violence of my world. Violence created by your kind. You turn beggars and thieves into heroes... How did you think that would end? With peace? It burns us! You and yours have created nothing but eternal war in my world! You have butchered us for entertainment!"

The mage spat in the woman's face, "Are you not entertained?"

---

## Summer

Summer raised an eyebrow at her sister as she stepped through the doorway.

Luna gestured tiredly from where she was lying upside down on the couch, “Lady Summer, Madam Claven. The Fates sent her to kill me.”

The timid creature dropped to her knees and buried her face in the floorboards. Summer stared at her in shock, and scratched her head awkwardly, “Yeah... Luna? I need your help with something.”

The Fae sighed and flipped upright, “What is it?”

Summer handed her a cloth bag, “These are some of the crystals the good doctor dug out of me. They should be fully charged.”

Luna sniffed, “Ew. You had these embedded in you?”

“Still do.” Summer sighed heavily, “I’m... Not going to survive, Luna. Cutting off my realm... It really was too much. My body has started attacking the replacement parts, and as that also includes stuff like my heart, my lungs and my brain, I’m fairly screwed.”

Luna looked up at her in surprise, “Wait... You’re dying? Really?”

She shrugged, “It can’t be helped.” Internally she was screaming, crying and throwing herself against every surface in the building. It wasn’t fair. She was about to lose it all, just because she tried to save Trei.

The white-haired Fae smiled, “Aha. So, these... Crystals.”

“You’re going to use them.” Summer grinned, “To set a trap. They have my essence, so make me the bait.”

Luna drummed her fingers idly, “Who is the trap for? I don’t think Janus is going to come hunting. He has what he wants. We can’t make him come to us.”

“For the Fates.” Summer replied, “Those bastards are doing something. Trying to separate me and Trei... So make it a tracer spell. Make it look like I’m trying to break down the dimensional walls between me and him. That I don’t care what damage I do, I’m trying to get him back.”

Luna laughed, “Just like Vastras tried.”

Summer nodded, “If I’m right, the Fates will intervene.”

---

## Rendi

Rendi spun, drawing and tossing a dagger.

The figure that had penetrated the Garden barely reacted, already falling to their knees. The assassin stared in shock, and then rushed to his side, holding his friend. He cradled the dying man's head, looking at wonder at the wounds lacerating the man's body. Most of the cuts were shallow, from a small bladed weapon moving at speed, but several more were not. Half a dozen holes had been punched in his chest and out his back. A spear.

"First." Rendi spoke quietly, and the man raised a bloodied hand, grabbing the side of his face, "Vastras."

Rendi winced, "The mage did this to you?"

"No... Elf." The First breathed with difficulty, "Serves... Mage... Trei... Trap..."

The assassin gripped the hand of the First tightly, channelling energy into the Fae as the dust began to fade, trying to keep him conscious. "I don't understand."

"Trei... Is... Weapon..." The First gasped raggedly, the light in his eyes beginning to flicker, "You... Must... Destroy... Him..."

Then the man was gone, the hand struck the ground with a soft thump.

The assassin flinched as he felt his priorities rearranging themselves to serve his mistress. He could take no action that might be against her interests, and she was very interested in this man. It seemed all of reality had become interested in this mortal the moment he was slain.

He laid down his old commander slowly, and crossed the man's arms, and closed his eyes. A soul had been separated from the lifestream. A brave soul, who had found countless battles in service to his lord. It was this soul that had fought Hero alongside the Shadow Knight. Most believed it was this soul that had destroyed the mortal of rage that had come among them, and cleaved so many from the lifestream.

The First had always been modest, denying his role in that battle. He even went so far as to profess that the Lady Luna's skill had outstripped his own. Rendi had witnessed that skill first hand, when he had her bound, beaten and had unleashed several spellviruses against her. Every fibre of her soul and flesh had been infected, and she should have fallen. Should have died or succumbed to his efforts, yet she had remained unbroken. Her mind had remained clear, and free from trauma. That woman may well have been the only soldier who could outstrip the strength of the First.

The First had always lain at the right hand of Janus. They had been friends once, early in the days of the Fae. Where Janus lead, the First had followed. He had loved the man who had become his master, and had given all that he had for the meaning that lay in that loyalty. Whilst Janus had grown cold and old, interested in power and strength, the man who had been his soulmate had remained ever hopeful that the one he loved would return to him. He had served unquestioningly, destroying so many for a bitter soul that had long since lost itself to hate and envy. The life of the soul that had lost was a tragic one, full of sound and fury, but in the end signifying nothing. He would be lost, and forgotten. He had left no footprints in the sand that would not be washed away by the hateful memories of the one he had served.

Rendi clenched a fist, bowing his head as he fought against his emotions. His chest was heaving. He felt if he was burning up with anger, but it had nowhere to be directed. None of this should have ever happened in the first place. Today he had lost not just a friend, but a mentor. A hero

that he had worshipped. Over so many lifetimes, when Rendi had stood uncertainly with a dagger in hand, it had been the grey-eyed gaze of that grizzled old warrior that had hardened him.

A whimper cut the silence, and the Fae glanced up in surprise.

The blonde-haired Faeling was standing there, eyes wide, her bottom lip quivering.

Rendi swallowed nervously, holding up his hands slowly, "It's okay, Astrian."

He flinched as the Faeling tossed back her head and wailed, the high pitch screech drilling a hole somewhere deep inside his skull. He took a step towards her, and the Faeling turned and sprinted away, still screaming.

He sighed heavily.

---

## Claven

Claven finished washing the dishes, and was busy drying her hands when she noticed the servant standing behind her. She wasn't sure how long he'd been there. She still wasn't sure how he managed to come and go as quietly and silently as he did. At the very least she couldn't find the hidden channels that Luna had said he used.

She looked at him, "Another duty, Enri?"

The butler shrugged, "That is not for me to say, Madam Claven. The mistress has asked that you join her outside."

The Fae nodded sullenly, and shrugged on her coat as she walked towards the door. He was an odd one. Never used a single word more than he thought was appropriate or necessary. Claven wasn't familiar with him or his name, but not all Fae were famous, and some just kept to themselves. Some had suggested that Lady Summer had met all Fae, and knew them all... But others had said the same thing about Janus, and he'd never sought her out.

"Oh, get over yourself."

Claven shivered in the blistering wind, tucking her face into her coat as she stepped out, stopping slightly behind the Faen woman. Luna was standing knee deep in the snow, wearing what appeared to be a long t-shirt, and nothing else. Perhaps she didn't feel the cold? On the other hand, she might be as insane as some were suggesting.

Luna waved a hand, "Tell me, what do you see here?"

Claven glared through the snow, and looked back and forth, "Nothing. I can hardly see in front of me."

Luna laughed and turned, "Really? Try again, and this time, try and see the auras."

"I cannot, mistress." Claven responded sullenly. How many times did she have to tell the witch that she could barely use magic?

Snow hit her face and she gasped as she found herself on her hands and knees, her ears ringing. She touched her cheek gently, feeling as if it were burned. An angry voice spoke quietly, "I am not a witch, Claven. I am not a mortal. I am Fae. And I... Am not forgiving. Remember that."

Claven spat, looking in surprise at the red liquid that sank into the snow, "Will you police my thoughts now, mistress?"

"You live and die by my will, and mine alone." Luna replied angrily, "If that means you need to change your thinking to not offend me, then you will. Your life was forfeit the moment you raised a hand against me. Now, I'm sure you comprehend the idea of seeing an aura, so just try."

The Fae pushed herself upright, her tongue feeling her loosened fangs gently, and she glared at the snow. Some nonsense about focusing her mind. Opening the doorway inside her skull, letting her gain access to herself. She breathed slowly, and tried to picture a doorway. She jolted as the door in her mind swung open of its own accord, revealing a dazzling array of colours she couldn't even recognise. These were not the colours that the world was made of. They were more vibrant. They sang inside her skull as she pictured them.

She reached out for them, and gasped, falling to her knees as the colours flooded over the landscape in front of her, pooling in various places. She could see trees, and in them darker shadows. In the snow just in front of her she could see a dozen prone figures, breathing slowly.

Luna placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned in, “When I want you to do something, Faeling, you try it, whether or not you think you can. You had no skill with magic once, and you still don’t. I’ve forced open the door for you, letting you touch the stars. . . But believe me, if you reach out to them, they’ll burn you. You don’t have the skill or aptitude for much magic. But I won’t have you being killed because you’re a defenceless idiot.”

Then the Fae walked away slowly.

Claven didn’t move, she just sat there, in the wet and cold, staring at the world in front of her. She was seeing it, finally truly seeing it for the first time. This was the world that other Fae had always seen. A place of wonder, of light and colour dancing in a complex pattern that played out as the lifestream flowed through all things. This was the beautiful world they had always lived in. . . That she had been denied.

And Luna had given it to her.

---

## Azrael

Azrael pulled off his helmet, revealing his blood-drenched face and matted hair. He tossed it aside and pointed his sword at the mage cowering behind the throne, and spoke calmly, "Surrender, King of Calis."

The man squeaked nervously, "What are your terms?"

"There will be no terms." Azrael sneered, "Magic is a pox on this world, and will be eradicated. Every man, woman and child shall be put to the sword. None shall be spared. The city will be demolished, and buried. No one will ever know that Calis has existed. It will be wiped not just from this earth, but from the minds and memories of all who live. Not a single jot shall exist in any history book, and not a single descendant shall continue to live. All who know of its existence will be hunted down and exterminated. No rumour will be allowed to survive, no legend to persist."

The man swallowed nervously, "That isn't encouraging me."

Azrael flexed, springing across the room. The sword came down in a crash, tearing apart the throne into a bunch of wooden fragments. He stood atop the fractured seat, the tip of his blade against the coward's throat, "You can die slowly, piece by piece, or you can die quickly. Your people can be hunted down like rats, and be torn apart by an army of angry soldiers. Or they can be swiftly executed, and guaranteed a fast trip into the next world."

The king looked up in true terror, looking at the blazing eyes of the paladin. "I... Surrender."

The sword plunged downwards, piercing the brickwork below.

Azrael turned, leaving it where it lay, and sighed heavily, wiping his forehead. One of the soldiers who had followed him into the room saluted, "Sir."

He nodded tiredly, "Out with it."

"Report." The man replied, "The eastern section of the city has been overrun. A network of crystals supplying power to automated defences has been found and destroyed. They were embedded into the roadways. Paladin Sallidin has requested further orders."

"Hold." Azrael replied tiredly, "Tell the Paladin to hold."

The man nodded, and Azrael dismissed him. The city of Calis was falling rapidly. Apparently their Queen hadn't expected or prepared for an army of holy soldiers, which had him suspicious. It was unlike Vastras to be so unprepared. That wasn't to say that the defences were not extensive. It had been difficult work, taking the city. He had lost several days of his lifespan to the sacrifices that the goddess demanded in exchange for her blessings. Yet, it wasn't enough. Not for a mage who had lived beyond the lifespan of most mortals, a mage who had spoken with gods, stolen from Fae, enslaved elves, and walked across the surface of the sun.

Vastras had killed thousands, and resurrected hundreds. She had mastered magics so complex that they defied comprehension, and had wiped out races that had ruled over dimensions that could not exist. She had walked through time and seen its infinite majesty, and managed to return with her mind intact.

This was not a woman who did not prepare for an enemy who could match her power. She was not some overconfident villain who could be defeated by a strong heart and a pure will. She had been the sole stabilising influence in the entire region for hundreds of years. She had personally trained every paladin who had attacked the city she had forged.

Azrael sighed heavily, looking around the throne room for some sign. Any sign. He was waiting



for the trap to snap closed, for his world to cave in around his ears and bury him in a regret that would follow him to the next world.

There was nothing.

No sign of danger... And yet, neither was there any sign of the woman herself. No sign she had even graced the halls of her husband. No portraits of the Queen, but plenty of the king. His exploits were recorded in tapestries, but hers were not. The stained-glass windows that depicted the triumphs of the kings through the ages did not record the history of the town's founder. It was as if Vastras had wiped herself from time.

He growled angrily and stalked over to the dead king's body, ripping the sword out and sheathing it. He knelt beside the dead body, and breathed in deeply before the gauntlets slammed his palms together, shaking the earth around him and threatening to bring down the roof over his head. He gasped as the power of the goddess hit him burning him and threatening to kill him. Every scratch and wound on his body began to flow profusely, and blood poured down from his forehead threatening to blind him. The paladin coughed, hacking and emitted a black cloud that dissolved in the air.

His hands parted and slammed onto the ground in front of him. The body twitched violently, and it arched upwards, screaming. The sound was overwhelming, and Azrael felt his ears pop a moment before every window in the building shattered. He glared at the shaking corpse, as the will of the goddess forced the soul back inside it. The corpse twitched, the head rolling around and breaking the neck before pausing to glare at him as the eyes melted and were replaced with blue tongues of flame. A voice screamed angrily inside his head, a guttural intelligible sound of pain and agony.

"Where is Vastras!?" He yelled at the ghoul angrily, and the creature fought, trying to break free of his control. It flopped up and down, arms flailing in a panic. Azrael flinched as he felt the ground beneath his hands beginning to melt as the spell began to reach the limits of what a mortal could channel.

"Where is she!?" He shouted, specks of blood spraying the air and mingling with the black dust leaking from his lungs. The ghoul twitched and the head turned to look at him from an awkward angle, shattering bone as it did, "She. Is. Not. Here."

Azrael glared, "By the goddess Sarin, you will tell me! Where is she?"

The ghoul coughed, heaving and hacking as the organs inside it began to fuse, "She. Left. Us."

Azrael clenched his teeth, feeling his own body beginning to crumble under the strain, "Where, demon? I can end your curse. You will tell me."

The ghoul laughed, a terrifying sound that seemed to make his every instinct come alive and try to flee. "Beyond your reach, mortal. I will die. You do not have the strength to bind me to this existence. I am not even the soul you sort to bind."

Azrael glared at it, panic beginning to set in his mind as he saw the soul becoming accustomed to it's new housing. If he left this much longer than the ghoul would gain enough strength to attack him, or to finish the binding and keep itself in this world. He doubted that many of the soldiers under his command could fight a fully-fledged ghoul, not after taking a city of magic users. They would be exhausted, tired, and spent. A ghoul however was never exhausted, nor tired. They did not have physical needs, they were beyond them. No need for food, despite their cravings for flesh. Just a twisted mind and tortured soul puppeting a physical shell.

“Tell me.” The paladin spat, spraying the creature’s face, and the ghoul sat up slowly, looking at its hands in curiosity, “The mage you call Vastras is in another realm. The place has no name, and lies beyond the Void. It is a place ruled over by the celestials. Even your goddess could not grant you entry.”

Azrael pulled back, ripping his hands from the boiling stone quickly, and drew his sword, slicing off the arm as the ghoul lunged at him. It fell forwards to the ground, the fire in the eye sockets vanishing as the spell was broken. He breathed a sigh of relief, that had been closer than he’d want to admit.

He gasped, grabbing his chest and fell forwards onto one knee, struggling to breathe. He was pushing the limits of his mortal body. Something Vastras had always chided him for. He heard a soldier yelling for a medic nearby through the dull mesh of his half-hearing ears, and he breathed uncertainly, feeling nauseous. Maybe he had pushed too far.

His hand dropped the sword unbidden, and the world seemed to accelerate into a blackening void.

His thoughts flew apart as he realised what was happening.

---

## Summer

Summer raised an eyebrow at the prostate Fae on her floor, and turned to the assassin crouched in the corner of her lounge room. “We had a guest did we?”

Rendi didn’t answer, he seemed to be staring beyond her, nervous and ready for a fight.

She rolled her eyes and walked passed him, snatching up a plant, “Remember to look after Astrian.”

She wasn’t too worried, she could feel the Faeling nearby. A little knot of angry emotions, and she wasn’t really up for another argument with the little Faeling. Rendi wouldn’t let her come to harm, not with the command that Luna had given him. Besides, she’d be here too, soon.

Summer entered her room and closed the door tiredly. Her clothes slid off her quickly and she collapsed onto her bed, twirling into a crouched sitting position. The Fae’s head dropped onto her knees, and she felt the exhaustion rolling over her, dragging her down and trying to suffocate her. Her thoughts became a tangled web of panic and regret, with the only moment keeping her together being Trei... Asking her to marry him.

She slipped into sleep.

---

## Luna

Luna opened her eyes groggily and shrugged the blankets from around her shoulders, pausing as she realised she wasn't alone in the room.

Her cheeks flushed red and she grabbed the blankets quickly, glaring at her house guest, "What do you want, Claven?"

The Fae looked down in embarrassment, "I brought you some breakfast."

Luna pushed aside her emotions with difficulty and looked at the bronze tray being proffered, and struggled not to smile. It wasn't just some breakfast. It was an actual decent and nice breakfast. A warm cup of syrup, still steaming. A small brown cube of sugar crystals, sitting beside an arrangement of grasses, tucked with several purple flowers, centred around a white tulip.

She looked up, "Breakfast in bed, eh?"

Claven looked away from her, her jaw tightening, "I am your servant."

Luna wanted to kick herself. This was a peace offering. From a woman who certainly didn't need to offer it. She'd hurt the woman, and basically enslaved her, for something outside of her control. It had been death or treason. She couldn't blame her... Even if she was punishing her for it. Had to. She couldn't let something like this slide, not in the current political environment. Everyone had to believe that the Shadow Knight was an unbeatable cruel mistress. Had to believe that they would die if they went up against her.

Luna patted a hand from under the blanket on the bed beside her, and Claven sat down slowly, still facing away from her. Luna sighed heavily, and leaned her chin on her shoulder, "I'm sorry. Really."

Claven swallowed nervously, but didn't seem to find the words. Her aura was a shocking twist of colours that came and went. She really was just a tangled mess of emotions. Understandable, considering everything she was going through.

Luna smiled tiredly, "You know, I don't get to relax like this very often."

The Fae nodded timidly, and then turned, dislodging Luna, and held up the cup of nectar. The princess flashed through a series of thoughts, some involving not wanting to expand this whole mistress-servant relationship, others involving knowing it was cold, she was a naked, and she did kinda want to stay rugged up in bed.

She sipped from it slowly, letting the burning liquid ooze down the back of her throat slowly, obliterating anything in its path. She breathed, feeling the cold air fill her lungs easily, and smiled, "That was fresh. Did you harvest it?"

Claven shrugged, "I may not be good at magic, but I know my way around the kitchen well enough."

The princess smiled, "Really? So what did the councillor used to do with her days?"

A tendril of grass was held up, and Claven spoke as Luna nibbled on the end of it, "Administration. Boring bureaucracy. Stuff like plumbing and housing planning. My realm doesn't have a lot of strong magic users, so we rely a lot more on the physical sciences. The largest city is powered by a water wheel, and maintaining that is a huge headache."

Luna slurped up the rest of the blade, "I don't think I've ever really visited your realm before, Madam Claven."

The Fae shrugged, holding up a flower, “The last time you were in Calvenus, that I know of, you were hunting Hero.”

Luna froze, her mouth half-full of petals, and she swallowed awkwardly. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

Claven rolled her eyes, “I’m as glad as anyone you stopped him. It has taken a while to recover the infrastructure, but we’re getting there.”

“I blew up a water wheel. A big one.” Luna said slowly, “Is that the one that’s creaking and groaning for you now?”

Claven covered her mouth to hide a smile, “Yes. It hasn’t quite recovered from having the axle blown out of it.”

Luna nodded at the nectar, revelling in her own laziness, “And no one has ever offered to help you fix it?”

“Minor realm.” Claven shrugged, holding up the cup, “We’re not important enough to be a concern for most people, and we don’t have the rare resources to trade that others have. Not since the Arbiter requisitioned our mountains.”

Luna winced, “I know the feeling. He requisitioned the light here.”

Claven glanced up at the window, “It wasn’t always dark?”

“Oh, dark.” Luna laughed, swallowing a ball of nectar, “Just not this dark.”

---

## Vastras

Vastras sat down opposite Trei slowly, in the chair that the Fate had been using.

The ghoul looked ragged, and thin. His skin was starting to waste again, and his eyes were sunken. He seemed tired, too tired for all of this. Ready to go to his rest, to give up on the life that had been forced on him.

He looked up at her slowly with those dark eyes that lit the pit of her stomach on fire, watching her, uncomprehending. He was too worn out to realise who she was. Too close to the threshold of death.

Vastras drew a knife and cut open the palm of her hand, and cupped it, offering it to him.

Trei didn't seem to notice, or respond, at first. Then he sniffed the air, as if his instincts were guiding him and his mind was still asleep. The mage squealed as her hand was suddenly grabbed and she was yanked off the seat. She shivered and struggled not to giggle as it tickled. The ghoul slavered over her, and she pulled back, "That's enough, Trei."

The creature moaned, but settled back against the wall where it was chained.

Vastras glared angrily, and waved a handful of dust in the air. "Damn. You really aren't home, are you, Trei?"

She'd been flirting with an uninhabited flesh sack.

Her elf companion emerged from the wall silently, pointing a spear.

Vastras sneered, turning to her, "That is his flesh. His soul is elsewhere. Can you track it?"

---

## Summer

Summer paused as she entered the main room, still adjusting her shirt.

She looked back and forth between the three, and then scratched her head, “What the heck is going on?”

Astrian was poised atop a couch, hissing and tossing nightmares from her skull towards Rendi, who was cowering in a corner, trying to cut his own throat, whilst the Fae she could have sworn was dead was struggling to hold onto the blade and get it away from him.

The not-so-dead-Fae winced, “Summer, can you please calm down that tiny Fae before this guy kills himself?”

Summer walked over, and flinched, pulling back her hand, “No, Astrian! No biting!”

The Faeling stuck out her tongue briefly and then turned back to attempting to melt the insides of Rendi’s skull. She sighed heavily and picked up the squirming Faeling, blocking her magic with a quick and simple barrier spell. It didn’t stop the fangs from sinking into her wrist as Astrian protested.

The newcomer yanked the blade aside, tossing it across the room, and breathed a sigh of relief, before turning slowly towards her.

Summer’s heart skipped a beat.

The black eyes staring into her. There was no one else who looked at the world like that. It had to be. She didn’t understand how. But it had to be him. “Trei.”

He smiled nervously and scratched his head nervously, “Hey, Summer.”

She glanced down at the manic Faeling in her arms lashing out, and smiled, “I think Astrian recognised you, too.”

He cocked his head, “That’s Astrian?”

Summer let the Faeling go, rubbing the bite mark, and the Faeling body slammed into him. He fell over, and the Faeling rubbed herself into him, wrapping around him, wings and all.

Summer sat on the couch slowly as she used some of her morning dust to heal her arm, staring at him. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. That boyish smile. Those unending eyes. A whirlpool of darkness and hope for her soul. “Astrian... Died, bringing you back. This is her new life... But she seems to remember a few things. Like you.”

Trei patted the Faeling on the head gently, surprising the young child, “I’m glad she’s safe.”

Summer shook her head, “How are you here, Trei?”

“I’m taking this body for a bit of a joy ride.” He said, shrugging, “I... Found a way to... Untangle myself. From my old one.”

The queen looked at him, tears welling in her eyes, “I couldn’t find where Janus took you. I’m trying... All the realms are mobilising. Preparing for war.”

“You’ll get one.” Trei winced and shook his head, his face a picture of a grim reality, “Janus wasn’t the one. Well, he was... But he’s dead now.”

Astrian made a nervous crooning noise, and Trei rubbed her cheek, “It was a woman. Not a Fae. Something else. Pink haired.”

Summer bared her fangs, “F’rir. Leader of the Fates.”

He sighed heavily, “She tortured me, and killed Janus... I’ve... I’m not going back there.”

Summer stood up, stepping towards him, but Astrian spun, wings flaring and hissing with claws raised. She paused, looking at him sadly, “Never again, Trei. I am never leaving you again.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking at the Faeling, “She’s... Still imprinted, isn’t she?”

Summer shrugged awkwardly, “... Yeah. Probably. I did try and explain this stuff gets horrible. She’ll learn to control it, but she’s a babe. It’ll take a while.”

Trei laughed, “So that’s why she attacked Rendi.”

Summer giggled, looking at the rocking assassin, “Probably. She’s always been good at messing with people’s minds.”

Trei stepped around the Faeling, grabbing her hands, “I’ve got you, Summer. We’ll make this work. We’ll survive this war.”

Summer felt as if she was intoxicated. Her thoughts slowed to a crawl and breathing became difficult. She moved her hands apart, and pulled him towards her. His hands released hers, wrapping around her waist, holding her against him gently.

Her hand reached up and delicately touched his cheek, brushing it softly as she stared into those black eyes. The entire world seemed to fade away, and she barely felt the stab of agonising pain as Astrian’s teeth latched onto her right wing. Trei leaned in, his forehead touching hers, and she sighed, breathing deeply. Her arms snaked around his neck gently, and she raised her face slowly.

“Gods damn it, Summer!” Came an angry yell, and the two spun. Summer’s hands went behind her back and she looked down, blushing.

Trei coughed politely and tried to smile, “Hey, Luna.”

“Don’t you ‘hey’ me!” The Fae exploded, storming over, “Twice! You were going to kiss her, again!”

Summer looked up at her sister, swallowing her surprise and trying to bury her guilt, “He is my bride, sister.”

Luna glared over at her, the aura around her a swirling storm of darkness, “Don’t push me, Summer.”

Trei scratched his head, “Luna... I know you came in a hurry and all... But I didn’t need you to pay me back.”

Summer smiled sweetly as her sister slowly realised what she had just done. “Forget something?”

Luna went bright red and dropped to the ground, covering herself with her wings. She muttered angrily, “Not my fault you interrupted my breakfast with your hot lover’s affair.”

Summer blushed, “It was not! Just a kiss!”

Luna just stuck out her tongue at her. There was a brief ripple of air and another Fae appeared, holding a bundle of clothes, “Um, mistress?”

Trei looked over at Summer, “Who’s she?”

“Ah. Trei, this is Madam Claven. Currently serving a life sentence to my sister after trying to kill her on behalf of the Fates.” Summer sneered, “Madam Claven, this is my bride.”

The Fae bobbed nervously, before stepping in front of Luna and shielding her from view with her wings. “So they got you back then, master?”



Summer rubbed her face with frustration, “Would everyone else get out?”

---

## Luna

Luna pushed Claven aside, glaring at her sister, “Get out? And let you claim him?”

Anger rolled over her like the waves of an unending ocean. It swallowed her. Enveloped her. It took her and made her its own. The hatred rose up like bile in her throat, colouring the world. She looked at Summer’s thoughts and aura, riding the waves and pinpointing weakness. Summer was hesitating, deeply embarrassed, expecting a torrent of hateful words but nothing more.

Black dust shimmered in the air for a moment as it cascaded off Luna.

She dashed forward, a void forming in one hand as she lashed out towards her sister. Luna gasped as the world slowed to a crawl, trapping her in the air. A strong hand gripped her wrist, and she flashed a glare sideways, staring in astonishment.

The black-eyed Fae standing there yawned, “You know, I always thought Summer was the more impertinent of the two of you. Maybe that assumption needs to be reviewed.”

Luna struggled, trying to pull away, but she couldn’t. She felt as if she was trapped in sap, barely capable of moving at all. The Fae sighed heavily, “I don’t usually interfere, as a rule. However, I cannot allow you to attack your sister. If you were to succeed in injuring her, as you are about to, then Summer will kill you.”

She swallowed nervously, instantly regretting the mistake as the instinctual process began to slowly move, giving her the impression of drowning.

“You are a critical piece in this game that is playing out.” The Fae said, smiling at her in a none too reassuring way. “In fact, I would go so far as to say that none of this will succeed if you die here. You could ignore me. You have before. And I come back here and tell you, time after time, that you cannot stop Summer. Her current ambient level of magic is beyond the greatest you could channel. Even taking her by surprise is not enough. Look, now, in this tiny fraction of a moment you’ve been moving towards her.”

Luna flicked her gaze slowly towards her sister. There was a light shimmer forming around her. A pattern of light that indicated not just a spell, but a nearly formed ward. Her attack would slam into the shield, she would be rebuffed, and Summer’s next move would kill her before she could react. How was it possible? How could Summer have already generated the spell?

“Janus has been attempting to kill your sister for five hundred cycles.” The Fae said, squeezing her wrist painfully, “What chance do you have, petty one? Trei was already promised to another. And he made his choice. You need to live with it. Imprint or not, in no future, in no timeline do you end up with him.”

Luna felt her magic vanish as her heart broke.

The Fae released her and time slammed back into her. Luna crashed into the ward and was rebounded into the floor where she curled into a ball, wings wrapping around herself as the tears hit her, and she felt her whole body rock with anguish. The sob moved through her spasming her muscles and ignoring her efforts to stay in control. She didn’t want to be crying. She didn’t want to be the useless ball lying on the ground.

---

## Azrael

Azrael winced as he sat upright, feeling a stabbing sensation in his gut. He waved tiredly at the nurse who rushed to his side, ignoring her. He knew more about what was wrong than she did. Magic was a cursed thing.

He stood up slowly, and rolled his shoulders loosely. By the wavering in his legs he wouldn't be wearing his armour any time soon. In fact, going into battle would likely endanger everyone else around him, rather than assist them. He would be a dead weight.

Azrael picked up his sword from the reverent pile of gear and strapped it to his side as he continued to ignore the panicked whispers of the nurse. Then he turned and walked out of the tent.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the blazing sun overhead, but as they did he stared in horror at the city in front of him. The barrier was back, the aura of it radiating as boulders crashed down from overhead, shattering before turning to dust.

He turned and moved towards the commander's tent.

Azrael ignored the guard who attempted to block his way and tossed the flap aside. He paused, scrutinising the map pieces on the table as he entered. The man behind them, trying to plan a failing strategy, barely acknowledged him with a grunt. To be expected of his father.

He stepped forward and tapped a tavern to the east of the palace on the map, "Concentrate fire here."

The king raised an eyebrow, "And why should I listen to a man who failed to even keep the city?"

"This is where the Queen stored a good deal of her magic." Azrael replied, ignoring him, "There are other points throughout the city, but the automated defences would utilise this store first."

The king leaned forward on the map, "You can locate these stores?"

"The goddess may reveal them." Azrael shrugged, "However, I can assure you the defences are automatic, though intelligent. The Queen has left the city, and is engaged with the celestials."

The king clenched a fist, "Gods. It always has to come back to gods with you, doesn't it?"

The paladin didn't reply, and then tapped a sewer grate near one of the main walls, "This isn't here. It's under the wall. Have you checked the defences around it?"

"Boy. Answer me."

Azrael looked up at him tiredly, "Calis was the city of magic. If you thought you could attack it without involving those who are invested in its existence, then you were naive. The one who founded it, and forged every inch of its defences, may well be the most powerful witch to have ever lived. Sheer might alone is not enough to stop her, it will take cunning and understanding as well."

The king sighed heavily, "Those are brave words, boy."

"As are yours, king who has sworn to serve the goddess." Azrael replied firmly, "Or have you forgotten who it is I represent?"

The king seemed to grow old and tired for a moment, as if an endless winter had taken all the joy from his life, "I have never forgotten for a single moment who you represent, Azrael."

The paladin looked back to the map. His father's words were empty. They always had been. Not once had he turned them into reliable action, it was his advisers who did that. Advisers such as

himself.

“If we are to win this war, we must find a way to cut off the flow of magic to the automated defence systems.” Azrael rubbed his chin, “The easiest way to store magic is by harnessing crystals. I believe that Calis had an extensive mining operation, did they not?”

The king nodded, “Yes, the mines extend beneath the entirety of the town, but do not seem to go beyond the borders of the walls.”

Azrael smiled, “Then that is where we need to begin. Do we have enough men to dig?”

---

## Rendi

Rendi surrendered the amber in his hand willingly, not daring to look at the child who took it with a brief squeal. That wasn't a child. She wasn't a Faeling. She was something else. Something that could go inside your head and make you kill yourself before you even realised what you were doing. She was a living curse.

At least he had the candy to try and bribe her not to attack him.

Summer smirked, "Careful, Rendi. She might condition that response."

The assassin looked at the queen blankly, "Better than... That. My queen."

The queen considered him for a moment, "... True."

He stood slowly and inched around Trei towards his mistress, flinching as he heard Astrian issue a low warning growl. A Faeling who was imprinted. This was probably one of the worst situations that could happen. Especially when that child has so much power to pack behind the confusing and overwhelming complex emotions they were feeling.

Rendi crouched beside his mistress, and stroked her cheek softly, "My lady."

Luna grabbed his hand and pulled herself upright, her sadness seemingly vanishing. She was burying her emotions, making her aura flare even more brightly and telegraphing what she was actually feeling. The princess wiped her face with irritation and stood up, "Sister... Someone stopped me hitting you."

Summer looked at his mistress in distaste, "Tyr."

Luna cocked her head, "You saw him?"

"Being dragged out of time isn't a new experience for me." Summer replied nonchalantly as if she were speaking about common magic and not reality-altering magic, "It is the first time I've seen Tyr directly intervene though. It seems he actually is trying to accomplish something. And that you're important to it."

His mistress stiffened, "I hadn't thought of it that way. Are you sure he wasn't just protecting you?"

Summer nodded, "He would have just needed to give me a moment's warning. Like he did when Janus took Trei."

"Who is Tyr?" Trei interjected suddenly, and Rendi turned, "Ah. He is... Fae, but not. Old. From the first cycle."

Summer rolled her eyes, "He's like you, Trei. Someone tried to resurrect him, not knowing that Fae are supposed to get reincarnated. Which sort of trapped him permanently as a ghoul, and outside of the normal flow of time. An eternal soul somehow bound to become mortal. It didn't work, and screwed things up royally. He... Watches us. Everyone. Just turns up for a few moments here and there, important moments that change the Fae as a people. Never does anything, just watches for a moment and vanishes. Like he was there when archaeologists discovered I was once Summer."

Trei considered things for a moment, "I'm... Not really a ghoul anymore, am I? More a... Poltergeist?"

Rendi glanced at the body the human had taken, and shook his head, "If I may, Master Trei, you are more than you realise. That physical shell is yours now. Your soul is bonding with it..."

And changing it. It isn't quite Fae anymore, either."

Luna put a hand on his shoulder, "Rendi, you can see that?"

"Yes, mistress." He replied easily, "I am an expert at disassembling the constraints of a Fae's physical shell without harming the soul."

Summer glared at him, "Torture. Just say it."

Rendi shrugged, "Sometimes. Sometimes death. The same principles apply. However, this physical shell is no longer the First's. It has begun to adapt to the humanity of the new owner. Cellular division has rapidly increased, and spontaneous regeneration has started. In fact, from my brief observations, I would posit that the genetic makeup of the shell is... Shifting. New sequences are being introduced, though I cannot tell from where."

Summer laughed and gently punched Trei, "A hybrid. You're becoming a hybrid."

He turned to her slowly, "Wait... Does that mean I'm... Alive?"

"Living and dead are binary terms." Luna yawned, "The moment Summer brought you back, they didn't make sense anymore. You've always been a little dead and a little alive, since you came back."

Trei looked directly at her and Rendi felt his mistress' aura flare as the gaze fixed on her face, "And?"

Luna smiled sadly, "Yeah, you're leaning a bit more towards the living side now."

Rendi intercepted the flying fury and held a bead of amber in front of her nose and winced as she nearly took his hand with it. Summer laughed at the sight, and Luna frowned, "Maybe, whilst Trei is here, we should find Astrian another guardian."

Summer sighed heavily, "You're probably right. She has been trying to introduce suicidal thoughts into my head during feeds. A bit distracting."

Rendi stood stiffly, "I would suggest we move Astrian to your realm, mistress. There her safety can be guaranteed."

Luna turned, "Claven, you mind playing babysitter?"

The Fae blushed bright red and bowed her head, "If it is what you wish."

"No." Luna growled, rolling her eyes, "I asked if you minded. That ain't an order."

Rendi shrugged, cradling Astrian and offering her another amber piece, "I will watch over the Faeling."

Summer laughed, "She drove you out of your mind. You can't protect her."

Rendi looked at the queen, "The child can care for herself, it is true. Yet that danger only arises with the presence of the young master, here. I am the sensible choice. Astrian will be safe in the Eveningsong."

"She'll be a queen." Summer retorted and shrugged, "I can't think of anything better."

Luna nodded, "Go, Rendi."

---

## Claven

Claven was confused.

She was upset that she'd missed the opportunity to raise the Faeling. She couldn't work out why, either. Who would want to raise a terror with that kind of insane power? Why would anyone even want to mother that child?

Maybe it was the thought of serving Luna.

A deep thrill ran from the top of her head to her toes. The thought of the woman turning to her with a smile, and reaching out gently and stroking her cheek.

Claven coughed nervously, trying to squash the thought, and then turned red as everyone looked at her. "Nothing."

They went back to discussing the logistics of protecting Trei, and preparing for the coming war against the Fates. Claven however wanted to sink into a wall and disappear. How could it have happened? How could she not have seen the signs coming?

She'd made her breakfast. She'd fed her in bed.

She had a crush.

Claven felt angry, wanting to hurt someone, herself, anyone. Why was she infatuated with the woman who had stripped her of her freedom? Who had turned her into a slave for doing the only thing she could to survive. A woman who forced her to wash dishes and scrub floors, ignoring that she was a councillor, one of the rulers of the Fae. She had the right to speak to the queen, and to oppose her. And instead she'd been turned into nothing but a... Slave.

She turned red as she realised she didn't mind. She didn't mind doing what Luna demanded. She was cruel at times, yes, but she was also kind. She had let Claven see magic for the first time in her life. She had served her tea as if she were an ordinary house guest. She let her sleep in. This wasn't the future of a slave, who could be beaten and betrayed every moment of their life.

She could trace the moment this had started.

It was easy enough.

When she'd seen the world for the first time, sitting there on her knees staring at the dark forest, her cheek still stinging from where Luna had hit her.

---

## Summer

Summer dropped onto the couch glumly as the assassin left, and glared at her sister and the weird woman with her. She had nearly had her first real kiss with Trei. Not stolen because one of them was about to die. He had gone to kiss her, to show her he cared. That it wasn't just a twist of fate, that he really did have feelings for her, despite everything she'd done.

Instead her jealous sister had to turn up, all fired up.

It really didn't help that Trei quite clearly thought that Luna was adorable when she was angry. The man would have to learn to keep his emotions in check if he was going to stay in the Faen realms, instead of wearing his heart so openly. He would also have to learn not to think about another woman when she was still in the room. She knew it was probably instinctual and that Trei might not even be aware that he was attracted to Luna, but it did make her want to kill her.

The feeling was probably mutual... But Trei was hers. Luna would just have to suck it up.

The dark princess sat down slowly opposite her, warming her hands on the fire, "If you think I'm going, forget it."

Trei looked from one to the other, "Luna..."

The Fae glanced at him terror, "Please don't."

He sighed, and put a hand on her shoulder comfortingly, "You know this isn't about choice. It's just how it is."

Luna vanished with a popping sound, quickly followed by her new slave.

Summer winced, "Ouch."

Trei sat down next to her, leaning on his knees, "She's crying now, isn't she?"

"Or killing someone." Summer tried to reassure him, badly, and the man groaned and ran a hand through his new hair, pausing as he looked at his hand, "This is starting to look more like me, isn't it?"

She shrugged. As much as something in her craved him she hadn't studied every inch of his old body. Being in the same room with the rotting stink pile had been a problem at times.

Trei turned his gaze to her and Summer felt herself melt inside. When he looked at her like that... She would do anything for him. Anything at all. She doubted he knew just how much control he had over her, or how much a hint of rejection would hurt.

He grabbed her hand in the calloused hands of the assassin, "I'm with you, now and always."

She squeezed back, unable to speak, her throat suddenly dry. Trei had done some serious growing up whilst he was away. No more the naive mortal. There was something stronger about him... But he was still the same slightly awkward man. Just... Better.

Trei stood up suddenly, and smiled at her, "So, got a towel for me? I'm sure this guy stinks about as bad as the last one. Death is terrible like that."

Summer flushed red as a dozen thoughts ran through her head, and she stood up, a towel appearing in one hand, "Come on. I've got something to show you."

She lead him out into the garden, down the winding trail behind the small cottage and to where the waterfall was roaring. She dropped the towel on the ground and grinned over at him, "Don't get lost."



Then she turned and dove through the waterfall, tumbling as she hit the mud on the other side. She stood up, shaking her wings with a buzz just as Trei came crashing in beside her.

She looked over at him, noticing instantly that his wings were gone. He really was becoming more human.

Trei stood up tiredly, looking around at the quiet and still cave, and the blue waters sitting there pooled, "This is kinda beautiful."

Summer grinned and put an arm around him, leaning into him, "It took me a while to get it right, but this is my favourite part of the garden."

He placed his wet arm around her shoulders, squeezing tight.

They stood there for a moment, just letting themselves be.

Her heart thumped as she thought about it. She'd been planning to do this for a long time. She wanted to do it. She didn't think Trei would freak out or reject her... But all the same, her body had entered fight or flight mode.

Summer walked over to the edge of one of the pools, took a deep breath and reached up for one of her shoulder straps. She felt Trei's hand on hers and froze. His other hand went around her waist, holding her against him as he breathed quietly, and Summer relaxed against him. "You know you don't have to one-up Luna, right?"

Summer flushed red and nearly stamped her foot. "This has nothing to do with her."

Trei breathed in sharply, and nearly whispered, "Sorry."

She leaned her into him and sighed heavily, "I know. Our life is complicated."

His hands grasped her shoulders and turned her around, and she looked up into those empty eyes of his. Those swirling whirlpools of nothingness that ate away inside her, breaking her down and setting her free.

Summer reached up and grabbed his head from behind and pulled it towards her.

Her scent filled the air as Trei bent towards Summer, not resisting the firm grip on his skull. She was soft, as their lips merged. The quiet peace between them evaporated and Trei felt her tongue dance towards his. He fenced with her briefly, before tracing the sharp points of her teeth. His arms around her tightened, pulling her against him.

Trei felt a soft breeze blow, as Summer's legs wrapped around his waist. She didn't seem to weigh anything at all, and he could feel her wings moving softly against his arms.

A shock passed through Trei. He tried to gasp, but nothing emerged. He dimly heard Summer scream and felt her falling away from him as something rose up and struck him in the back of the head.

---

## Vastras

Vastras nodded to the elf as she withdrew the spear.

The mage sighed heavily, standing over Trei as he gasped, blood pouring from his mouth. Her heart ached softly as she looked down at him. She wasn't sure if he was dying. Life and death weren't binary for him, not anymore... And this new body of his was still changing, before forced to adapt to the soul that crawled inside it. Regeneration abilities tend to be highest when mutation is occurring. It was more than possible the body would survive... And even if it didn't, Trei's soul might. Depending on his will to live.

She turned and looked at the red-haired Fae lying on the ground, holding her chest whilst trying to focus her eyes. The purple wings drooped lifelessly on the wet cave floor. Yellow dust dripped from her skin in rivulets.

Vastras sighed and crouched beside her, "You're dying, Summer. Queen of the Fae. Goddess of the Fae. You will die, and return to the lifestream. Murdered Fae do return to the stream, that doesn't change. The reason you don't come back... Is your soul is corrupted by the death. The lifestream expels the corruption, to protect itself."

Summer glared at her, trying to speak, but all that happened was a river of blood poured out of her mouth.

Vastras patted her head softly, "And you, my sweet little goddess, are the lifestream. You are just a piece of the source. When it rejects you, it will reject itself. When that happens, the Fae will be undone. The Fates will be undone. The gods will be undone. Magic itself will cease to exist."

The mage stood up tiredly, "If there was another way to eradicate magic, I would have. But there wasn't. So I created Trei. A man perfectly crafted to fit your soul. I'm sorry for that... Using him... Hurts. Watching you, one of the greatest magic users of all time die... Hurts. But it has to be done. To end the wars. To give us a chance to survive."

The elf shifted behind her and Vastras turned, flinching as she saw Trei on his hands and knees with the spear exploding into the ground from his chest. "Don't. Please. You don't need to die, Trei. Your part is nearly done in all this... And then you can have a chance at a normal life."

The mage turned back to the red hair glaring at her and drew a small dagger, "Unfortunately, I need to ensure the corruption of your soul, queen. It will be... Unpleasant."

---

## Azrael

Azrael crawled through the tunnel, elbows scraping against the rough stone. He paused, looking at the feet of the soldier ahead of him, “What’s the hold up?”

“We’ve reached the barrier, sir.” He heard the soldier reply carefully, trying not to breathe in the dust.

The paladin winced. The barrier extended beneath the ground. Deep beneath. Which meant that the barrier wasn’t a wall, but a sphere. A sealed unit. An infernal construction that may not actually be capable of being destroyed from the outside, relying on a core of magical energy at the centre. Probably stored energy, considering how Vastras had been running the show so far.

Stored magic. Useful, and can be extremely overpowered when the energy utilised had been stored over many years, accumulating to the point where it could exceed the caster’s abilities. However, not without weakness.

He placed a fist against the ground, pushing against the unyielding earth. This would be a dangerous spell, risking a cave in. There was nothing stronger than the earth’s desire to return to itself, all it required was something to give that will substance and then the earth would throw its full strength against the barrier. Unfortunately, the earth around him would also move... But he needed to be this close for it to work.

“Tunnellers, prepare for a collapse.” He ordered, waiting as he heard the order carry backwards, and the man in front of him tensed.

He touched his foot gently, “This will be on you. The barrier collapse, and you need to break through in front of you. There’s only about a foot of dirt above our heads. Break through, and then reach down and grab me.”

He turned his attention back to the dirt resisting his fist as he pushed against it. A timeless magic, born from when the world had first been given form. All mass was attracted to itself, drawing itself together. The world was a great mass, constantly drawn inwards, constantly fighting for every inch, drawn inwards by a force so great it had been given its own name.

Vastras was the one who had taught him the magic of controlling gravity, so long ago. She stored it, keeping it in one of her many gemstones. The queen had often used it as a weapon against those who got in her way. A way of reminding them that she was more powerful than them, that she was unrivalled amongst all of humanity. It was a cheap trick. Manipulating gravity was a simple magic. Simple, and cheap.

“Awaken, quicken. Arise and breathe. My thoughts give form, and my soul gives flesh. My will gives fire, and my breath gives air. Bound by the elements, blessed by the goddess, exhale.” He whispered fervently, sweat slowly appearing on his forehead.

There was a crushing roar as the soil around him collapsed.

---

## Luna

Luna punched another tree. A shock ran through it and there was a shattering sound as the ice crystal inside exploded, followed a moment later by the tree itself becoming little more than kindling that rained from above. The Fae fell on her knees, sobbing heavily.

As her tears struck the snow they crystallised, forming a latticework that spiralled outwards, turning the slush into a brilliant smooth blue surface. Freezing the entire realm. There was a cacophony of explosions as the entire forest began to freeze and explode as the limits of the trees' cavities were reached. Still, the Fae wept. She wept for a future she could not have, for a man who did not love her, and for a child who would not be hers.

She could feel him. A tiny knot of emotions at the back of her head, telling her where he was, what he was feeling. Ever since she'd been bound to him she'd been able to feel him, and the more time since... The stronger it got. Janus had been able to dull the sensation, but not block it. And now...

She could feel what he felt. The warmth. The adulation. The craving. Summer had laid her claim, and he had responded. He belonged to her, heart and soul. He loved her. Completely. Unrepentant.

A warm cloak dropped over her shoulders and Luna winced, trying to fight back the tears. She'd left this too long. She didn't want to say it, but she had to.

She liked Claven, too. The stubborn woman was a candle beside the wildfire of Trei, but still... She didn't want to hurt her.

No, that was the problem. She could hurt her. Too often. She was willing to treat Claven as less than Fae. To punish her for a crime she had no choice in. To hit her.

Claven was worth more than that.

In another world, even in time, Luna might have considered whether she could have a future with the woman. She was beautiful, stubborn, and intelligent. She was soft-hearted, but would risk everything for those she cared about. Those were the traits of someone worth living for. Someone worth caring about.

Luna was a monster. She knew it. She was willing to hurt anyone around her. She didn't deserve peace or happiness. She was a monster, because she had to be. She was the executioner of the Council. The one sent to kill fellow Fae. The only one trusted to wage war. To destroy the eternal souls of her own family.

She stood up, breathing shallowly, dragging the cloak tight around her, "You can go, Claven."

The woman breathed in sharply, and Luna turned, glaring at her through teary eyes, "I said, leave. Your crimes are forgiven, and I don't want you here."

Claven looked at her sadly, "You are hurting, mistress. I will be here for you."

"I cannot be yours!" Luna yelled angrily, flashing her teeth, "I will only hurt you. You need to leave. Set your heart on someone who isn't willing to stab you in yours. Someone worth caring about."

She shoved passed her and into the house, before closing the door and sealing it.

---

## Rendi

Rendi clapped his hands over his ears, falling to the ground as Astrian tossed back her head and wailed.

It wasn't a sound he'd heard her emit before.

It was a living sound, one that burrowed into you, shaking the fibres of your being until you felt the terror and anguish that she felt. It was the sound of death. The wail of a banshee. It was a pain in the soul, made tangible.

He stretched out a hand hesitantly for the Faeling, and touched her head. She cut off mid-scream and relief hit him like a dead weight. He nearly collapsed as the Faeling turned to him, eyes wide and tear-stained. There was horror etched into the young child's face.

Rendi frowned, "What is it, Astrian? What did you feel?"

The Faeling leapt on him, knocking him onto his back. He felt her hands grab the sides of his head, and then it was his turn to scream as a flood of images, thoughts and ideas poured over him.

Rendi found himself leaning against a cave floor, gasping for air. Blood seemed to pour from his mouth. He was drowning. Drowning in his own blood. He looked around in terror, and found a spear piercing through his back and into the ground. He looked up at the elf holding the spear, a cold-hearted beauty, and gasped, trying to get her attention.

The elf turned to him, and he found themselves standing in Summer's garden. The elf was drenched in sweat, breathing heavily, and waved a hand, "Come to do better, assassin?"

Rendi frowned, touching his uninjured chest in confusion, "What do you mean?"

"Tragedy is one of the lasting themes of the history of Elfkind. We are accustomed to pain, and loss. I have buried three husbands, and ten grandchildren, mortal."

He turned, expecting to see the mortal, instead he felt a flash of blinding pain, and felt as if he were falling out of the sky. He hit the ground groaning, and looked over, seeing the shrapnel that had once been his wing in surprise.

"Well, then. It's done."

He rolled over, finding himself on the cave floor again, watching the mage stand up slowly. Vastras. She was coated in blood, her dress stained and her arms dripping up to their elbows. The mage turned and smiled tightly, "Don't follow me, elf. Once I leave, I will consider your debt forgiven."

Rendi looked to the side, and saw the same elf. She seemed different now. Less cold. Her eyes... She was crying, quietly.

What was done? What was this?

Rendi coughed, spraying blood. The spear piercing his chest and into the ground was solid. It was the only thing holding him upright in his current condition. Forcing him to watch as Summer bled to death, her still beating heart held in Vastras' hand. Watch as the light slowly faded from eyes. Watch as the dust on her skin crystallised, shattered and faded away. Watch as the wings on her back dried up, shrivelled up and faded like cobwebs in the breeze.

---

## Trei

Trei coughed, spraying blood across the ground. He couldn't move. Couldn't even twitch his eyes. As if his connection with this body had been severed, whilst somehow forcing him to remain inside it. He could feel a familiar feeling creeping up towards him. The shadow of death. At this point it was becoming an old friend.

The spear piercing his chest and into the ground was solid. It was the only thing holding him upright in his current condition. Forcing him to watch as Summer bled to death, her still beating heart held in Vastras' hand. Watch as the light slowly faded from eyes. Watch as the dust on her skin crystallised, shattered and faded away. Watch as the wings on her back dried up, shrivelled up and faded like cobwebs in the breeze.

The mage sat next to her, crying silently. The heart in her hand was slowing, but still beating. She watched it intently, as if she were afraid to put Summer out of her misery. As if she wasn't the cause of all of this in the first place.

Hatred boiled inside him. If it weren't for the elf he would be trying to tear the woman apart. Rip her limb from limb. Break her neck. Rip out her eyes. She'd killed the only good thing to have ever happened to him. She'd engineered his life so that he would fall for Summer, just so she could kill her. Vastras was nothing but a monster. She deserved to die, inch by inch.

The elf crouched in front of him, "This is the Spear of Algar. The weapon of the Guardian of Alfheimr. No magic, nor force of will, can resist it. Do not try, little dead thing. You will only waste away quicker, and it would be preferable for me if you were to survive."

"Don't blame her too harshly, Trei." Vastras whispered and Trei felt his anger reaching new peaks, "Her name is Alphege Algar. She really is the guardian of Alfheimr, the realm of the elfin folk. She... Owes me. This will pay a debt. The elfin kind cannot break a vow, once given. They tend to die horribly when they do. Something about the goddess who created them. Well, almost a goddess. F'rir made them, before she ascended and became a Fate."

He blamed her. He blamed both of them. He would kill them. They would die, for Summer. For what they had done.

The elf touched his face gently, and Trei felt the numbness in his chest beginning to recede, replaced by crippling agony. The elf watched him, expressionless, blue eyes fixed on his, and a voice spoke musically inside his skull, "Do not move. Do not acknowledge. I can save you. I can't interfere and save Summer. My vow is binding. But your actions, are your own. You have a chance, a small chance. You must wait until the healer arrives. Then eliminate Vastras."

Trei struggled not to smile.

He would kill Vastras, and then he would kill the elf. But he was grateful.

---

## Luna

Luna froze, the stripped houseplant falling from her hands. The pot shattered on the ground as she stood there shaking, her eyes open wide. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She couldn't understand what she was feeling. It didn't make sense. It couldn't be possible. It wasn't. Somewhere in the background she could hear Astrian screaming.

Her hands curled slowly into fists, as she felt fear chasing a line down her spine, igniting the defences in her. Pushing her to anxiety and to the will to fight. Her energy levels flared, and her wings unfurled slowly. Luna flinched as she felt the brightness of her aura shining off the room. She bared her fangs as the muscles across her body flexed, trying to push her towards a goal, a target. She was trying to resist, trying to understand, but every instinct in her was screaming for war, for death and destruction. Demanding she become that terrible avenger again. To become the woman who had torn Hero limb from limb as the mortal begged to be spared. Begged for her just to end it and kill him. The mortal who had wept as she killed his bloodline, one by one.

She fell onto one knee, a fist striking the ground weakly.

The black dust rippled outwards, and the wood turned to ash and crumbled. The floor gave way, dissolving as it moved towards the walls.

Luna felt a single tear slipping down her cheek as the ash rained down around her, turning her white hair black. She looked up at the empty and dark sky overhead. There was no moon there, not tonight.

She stood up slowly as the ruins of her home faded away, becoming nothing but dust. The black dust that drifts in the air, pulled towards her, surrounding her, empowering her. It swirled around her in a swarm, and she felt the flicker as each speck fed magical power into her. She spread her wings wide, and flexed her hands slowly. She was the Shadow Knight. This was what she was created for. To be the weapon that the Evening Realms required.

"Mistress?"

Luna turned, and through the haze of ash and smoke she saw the Fae staring at her in confusion and fear. She felt a kick to her stomach. She wasn't sure she had the guts to tell Claven to leave again. It was hard enough the first time. And right now...

She shook her head slowly, "I... I told you... To go home."

Claven crossed her arms, "Don't insult me. Speak to me. Am I not Fae?"

Luna ground her fangs together, "I don't time for this, Faeling. Summer is dying. If you don't leave, then I can't protect you. This realm is about to become a battleground. Find safe harbour. Please."

The red-eyed Fae held up a hand, sprinkling a small amount of brilliant red dust in the air, "Our queen is in danger? An attack on one, mistress."

Luna rolled her eyes, "Fine. Follow."

---

## Alphege

Alphege watched as the mage stood up, dropping the heart and wiping her bloody hands on her dress. “Well, then. It’s done.”

The elf inclined her head slightly, watching the one she was oath-bound to closely. She had no love of this human had done her best to leave her mortality behind. She was a perversion, and her task was heresy. Her methods were not the fine-grained actions of a expert physician as she seemed to believe. No, this mage treated magic like a hammer, beating the realms into submission, there was no grace to her actions. It was repugnant.

The immortal beside her was recovering his strength. He would begin his attack in a moment. However, if she had timed this correctly then it would not matter and he would fail to intervene, and her vow would remain unbroken. A necessary evil, but one she intended to redeem herself for. Repentance was always an option open to the faithful who follow the narrow path. Allowing herself to be forced into this position was a mistake she did not deserve to be forgiven for, but her goddess would do so. It was not a choice. Alphege would simply have to try and prove to herself she was worth such forgiveness.

The mage turned to her and smiled tightly, “Don’t follow me, elf. Once I leave, I will consider your debt forgiven.”

She nodded nearly imperceptibly. The mage turned and vanished.

Alphege spun her hand, the spear jerking out the man’s body to a scream of agony. She flicked the blood from it and turned to face him, “I would rather not meet in combat.”

He spat blood at her feet, and then turned and stumbled, falling beside the prone Fae’s body. His hands were hesitant, shaking, as he touched her cheek gently. The elf watched dispassionately. The soul had already departed, what was left was but an empty shell.

“Can you bring her back?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, “No. One cannot resurrect a Fae. To do so violates causality and causes the soul to be ejected from the normal flow of time. There was one for whom it was done, and he cannot be perceived except by those with extreme levels of power.”

The immortal sighed heavily, “And you’re extreme? Like Summer?”

“I am but a candle to the sun that was the queen.” Alphege replied, “I am a guardian spirit. I stand at the doorway of a realm. The queen was the creator of such a realm. The power of creation is unmatched.”

He held the shell gently, tears pouring down his face silently.

She waited, silent and unmoving. Grief was a normal emotional process. Denying it to attempt an action was folly at this point. The queen was dead, and magic was already receding. Soon this realm would end, as would all others. Stored magic would persist for a short time. The magic stored in the living things of the world would sustain it, for a time. Yet no new flower would blossom, and no leaf would grow upon a tree. The realms had but a handful of seasons left before they collapsed and became nothing. The worlds had come from nothing, and would return to it. Ignoring the pain of a loved one lost would not aid them in delaying or offsetting this inevitability.

The elf sighed and raised her spear as the air rippled and a Fae in black armour appeared. He froze as the tip touched his throat, and he raised his hands, “I have no quarrel with you, elf.”

Alphege inclined her head, “Do not approach the young master. He is unsettled.”



She lowered the spear as the assassin stared, "So it really happened. Vastras killed her."

The immortal glared up at him, "Why are you here, Rendi?"

"Astrian poured her visions into my skull." The assassin replied curtly, "It took me some time to work out what she was trying to tell me."

Alphege remain motionless as the assassin stared, apparently unaware of the Faeling peeking through a gap in reality, half-hidden. The child would feel this. She felt conflicted. Among her kind, children were highly valued. They were coddled and protected from all wrong. Yet in this, as so many things, the Fae were different. They did not truly view children as children, but rather as adults who had forgotten themselves. In some respects, it reflected the truth of their life cycle, in others it was probably more traumatic a reentry into this world than was strictly necessary.

She felt the knife form by her throat, and remained still. The Shadow Knight spread her darkness over the area and whispered in her ear, "Did you hurt her?"

"Indirectly." She replied.

The Fae hissed gently, the knife beginning to split the skin delicately, "Is there a reason I shouldn't kill you, yet?"

"I wish to atone."

The darkness receded and Princess Luna stepped by her, looking at the body of her sister. Her hands opened and shut repeatedly, and then the voice of the timid Fae who had followed her echoed in the cave, "We should bury her. Here."

Luna nodded, fighting back tears, "It was her favourite place."

Trei stood up hesitantly, "I will."

"Screw you, Trei!" Luna hissed, "You're not the only one who lost her!"

The immortal flinched, "I know. I'm sorry, Luna. I'm sorry I exist. I'm sorry Vastras made me to kill her. I'm sorry I couldn't stop her when she carved out her heart. I'm sorry that Summer resurrected me."

Luna sighed heavily and grabbed one of his hands, speaking more gently, "Screw you for that too, Trei. We're going to need you. I still need you. And if you try and kill yourself, you can bet your ass that Astrian will drag your soul back again, just like last time. But this isn't over yet, in fact, things are about to go sideways."

Trei looked at her in confusion as Luna traced a spell onto the stone of the cave floor, "What do you mean? Vastras got what she wanted."

"Immortal." Alphege spoke with frustration, "Can you not yet clearly see it? The Fates attempted to separate you from the queen, merely to prevent what has just come to pass. Those that have been fighting you will no longer be your enemy. Repairing the damage done will be their concern, as much as yours. Vastras has unbalanced the cosmic powers with the assumption that those who hold such power will immediately take advantage and attempt to seize more power. That is not the behaviour of most thinking individuals however. They will first attempt to maintain the status quo. They will, in a short time, descend into chaos and war, that is inevitable. Yet, first, they will attempt to fix things. That advantage is yours. F'rir will guide your hand."

Luna snorted derisively as the earth imploded, "F'rir. Keep your religion to yourself, elf."

"F'rir died attempting to protect the immortal one, and keep him from the mortal witchqueen."

Alphege spoke impassively, “That is not to say that she did not foresee the possibility of her death, and prepare for it.”

All of them looked at her, and the elf felt almost as naked as when Vastras had walked in on her in the springs, “The goddess predicted my eventual involvement.”

Luna smiled and jerked a finger at the immortal, “Just one question. What do you feel when you look at him?”

Alphege felt her cheeks redden.

---

## Azrael

Azrael leaned on his knees, coughing. The collapse had been closer than he would wish to admit. Yet, only a half dozen had died. Better odds than he would have expected when penetrating the fortress of Vastras.

He glared through his visor. This wasn't a fortress. It was a cave system, not the inside of the city as he had expected. Something was off here. Going upwards should not have resulted in going downwards. Something inside Calis had responded to them, another magical defence. It had transported them to a cave system full of softly glowing crystal lattices.

Azrael frowned, waving a hand. The lattices weren't a defence. They couldn't be. They were draining quickly, but had been used as a source of magical power. Stored magic. This wasn't some new trap of the queen, this was the heart of her network. Something was wrong. Vastras wouldn't have brought him here when she considered him a friend. She certainly wouldn't have now he was an enemy.

The cave rocked, knocking him to his knees. He rolled aside as a gem shattered where he had landed. He stood up, eyes tracing the aura in the air. A huge spell had been triggered. Enough to disrupt the magical matrices in the area. He flinched, glancing at the crystals that were blinking out, one by one. He couldn't afford to have his men stumbling around in the dark. "Move out!"

He ran forward, calling on the goddess. A brief trail of flame followed him, trying to indicate a way forward as the darkness closed in around them. The paladin's feet slapped against the hard rock, the metal clanging as he sprinted, hoping he was heading the right direction in this labyrinth. Moving towards a large explosion of magic wasn't the most intelligent thing to do, but it was as good as anything if Vastras' entire magical network was undergoing a cascade failure.

The queen had plenty of enemies, human and nonhuman. Whatever had attacked might assist him in his task, or it might kill him and his. It wasn't possible to make an assessment with the information he had on hand.

He skidded around a corner, pulling up his shield as light assaulted his senses.

He glared as his eyes adjusted, looking into a cave centred around an enormous gemstone pillar that was shining like the sun. In front of it he could see the source of the magical explosion, the aura still bleeding off.

They were humanoid, fallen to their hands and knees. Male. Rotting.

A ghoul.

How could a mindless beast be capable of summoning that kind of magic?

He drew his sword slowly.

---

## Alphege

Alphege slipped out of the log house and out into the quiet of the garden. Things had begun to get out of hand in there, and she didn't particularly enjoy watching Fae lose control of themselves. Mortals either, for that matter. There was nothing appealing about watching a drunk slowly lose the inhibitions that kept their relationships intact. To watch them break down, and reveal just how broken they really were.

She let a hand drift in the breeze, closing her eyes and breathing deeply as the garden spoke around her. Every tree, every flower and every blade of grass. There was a voice here, unique and quiet, but there if you took the time to listen. To breathe, and be still. If you just let yourself fade away, and listen to the world around you speaking.

She paused, opening her eyes slowly, feeling more centred as she turned to see what had felt... Off.

The elf approached, curiosity overwhelming her, as she saw the man sitting cross-legged, meditating as the wind spun around him in fractal patterns. She paused, considering him. He didn't seem to have noticed her approach. He was vulnerable, as he was born to be. Born to be the tool that would distract the queen into letting down her guard. Born to be the other part of her soul.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Alphege felt her cheeks redden as he whispered, and froze as she saw herself in a fighting stance. He hadn't reacted. His aura hadn't shifted. When had he noticed her? How had he? She'd moved silently.

Trei sighed, leaning back on his elbows and looking up at the sky, "Summer... She made this place. Not for a home for the people who wanted to follow her, though there was that in part. The garden itself... It hasn't got a practical purpose. It was just a piece of art. Her life's work... Is just an expression of what she felt. This place is... Eternal. The idea of it will persist long after it fades and dies."

Alphege nodded silently, and then wondered if he'd noticed. She was barely within his range of vision now. But she couldn't get the guts up to speak. He'd taken her completely by surprise, and now she wasn't certain of who she was, or what he was. Was she a threat to him? Or was he a threat to her? Did he pose a risk to Alfheimr? How could a mortal be a threat? Yet, he wasn't mortal. Not anymore. She didn't know what he was.

Trei smiled sadly, "My purpose is complete. I was born to kill the woman I loved."

Alphege felt a stab of pain in her heart, and she wished she could just fade into the background. She didn't want to be part of this conversation... Yet, she was. And she couldn't just abandon him when he was trying to figure things out.

"I should feel... Empty and broken." Trei sighed heavily, "But I don't. It doesn't feel real to me yet. All of this feels like a dream. As if I'm about to wake up for work. To beat the iron, preparing it for the master. To go back to being an apprentice for a man I could never succeed. Like I'm going to walk back into a life where I mean... Nothing at all."

The elf considered him, "What do you feel, mortal?"

"Mortality." He replied easily, shrugging, "I feel mortal. Even though I'm not. I feel like things will come to an end. That all of this is about to make sense, and that will be over... But nothing ever truly ends. All actions beget the next. The sun doesn't stop shining just because you wish it

would. Even if we win in the end, tomorrow will still come creeping in.”

Alphege took a timid step towards him, “You feel clarity. You begin to see how events fit together.”

“Yes.” Trei nodded sadly, “Yio. She tried to separate me from Summer, to protect her. The Fates are not allowed to move against Summer. Now we understand that they weren’t. And Summer killed Yio for her efforts. A Fate who... Knew that meeting me would bind her soul to mine. She did it anyway, in the hope she could avert this... Crisis. Whatever the effects will be.”

“Magic is dying.” Alphege replied simply. It was the truth. Even now she could feel the lifestream slipping away, the source of mana fading. Magic wasn’t gone, but it wasn’t being replaced either. All it would take is time.

He lifted a hand over his head, as if he were trying to grasp the moon, “This body... It isn’t human, and it isn’t Fae. It wasn’t even mine. I stole it... But the only reason I could work out how, was that Yio stole mine from me. She prepared me for this. As if it were important... As if she knew she might fail.”

The elf said nothing. Of course a Fate would know the outcome of her actions. Even this understanding that the mortal was stumbling across was contingent on a series of events. The Fate may have foreseen them, and set the wheel turning. That, at least, was hope.

“Elfkind was created by a Fate, weren’t they?”

Alphege sighed, “We do not discuss it with outsiders, mortal. Suffice it to say, that your understanding is incomplete.”

He shrugged, and lay back into the grass, watching the stars. “Yet, elf, you know the Fates. Better than I, anyway. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever had a decent relationship with any celestial, goddess, Fate, or otherwise. I never mattered, so I guess they never had a reason to pay attention to them.”

She sighed heavily, giving in. The elf walked over, and knelt down beside him, “Don’t be so foolish, mortal. You were engineered so that all celestials would fall in love with you. Astrian, Luna, Summer... All of these have had their lives irrevocably tainted by your touch, because of their celestial presence. If any god were ever to look upon you, they too would feel this inner conflict. No god could allow their judgement to be so horribly tainted. No god favoured you, mortal, because no god could risk paying attention to you. They all felt heavy hearts.”

He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow, “Is that guess?”

“F’rir loved you, also.” Alphege replied stiffly, “A source of confusion amongst my peoples.”

Trei smiled briefly, turning back to the stars, “I wish I could say it meant something to me.”

The elf crushed her own desires, “You are you, mortal. There is none who controls your destiny, not anymore. Vastras may have cursed you, to carry the burden of your love’s death with you until the end of days, but now, you can be something more. Something else.”

“And what am I?” He growled angrily, “Am I a mortal, elf?”

Alphege sighed heavily, “If that is your desire, it shall be yours. If the end of your life is what you seek, you will find it.”

Trei looked at her directly, “Now there’s something. What are you hiding?”

“Much.” Alphege replied coyly, “I am the Guardian of Alfheimr. All the secrets of elfkind are

my own. I defend our knowledge, and I keep our secrets.”

He rolled onto his side, “Don’t do that.”

She sighed heavily, “Fine. I do not believe F’rir wished for you to know.”

“Are you oath-bound to protect that secret?” Trei insisted, and she felt a wave of nausea pass over her. This man, whoever he was, learned things far too quickly for his own good. She could not deceive him, only keep him ignorant, and perhaps frustrated with her. The thought of his eternal anger burning against her was not a pleasant one.

“I am... Elfin.” She said slowly, “Please. Let me tell you of my people. There is not much I can say without jeopardising who we are, but a little can be known by an honoured outsider. I will treat you with that respect.”

Trei rolled back, frustrated but quiet.

Alphege sighed, “Mortalkind are... Mortal. Limited lifespans, from which they pass into a new life, one which is prepared for them by their gods and their deeds. Faekind are eternal, and longlived. When they die, they rejoin the lifestream, before returning to the world they have left. They follow a cycle of reincarnation unless their soul is corrupted. An eternal soul.”

She smiled sadly, “Elfkind are similar to that, in some respects. Our souls are eternal, yet so are our bodies. We do not die of natural causes. We live, as we have always lived. Created by F’rir once, a very long time ago. She created a pairing. A mortal with the soul of an eternal, who mated with an eternal, with a mortal soul. The mortal was our Father, whose body wasted away, but he did not. Remaining as a spirit to guide his descendants. The eternal was our Mother, and though she died from her mortal life, her body remained and became our realm.”

Trei smiled sadly, “That sounds like a terrible love story.”

“It is.” Alphege smiled sadly, “Tragedy is one of the lasting themes of the history of Elfkind. We are accustomed to pain, and loss. I have buried three husbands, and ten grandchildren, mortal. I have known love, triumph, and death. That is the way of our people. We do not have the taboos that Fae have against our mingling with your kind... But the heartbreak is inevitable. We know that you will die. It is nice, for a time. But it cannot last. We know it, as we always have.”

Trei winced, “I’m sorry.”

“As am I.” Alphege spoke softly, “I carry their loss with me, as I have for four hundred years. I swore that I would never again fall for a mortal. That I would be free. That I would serve as Guardian, as the warrior who has no need of a heart, but need of fire. Until I crossed your path. F’rir warned me that this would happen, and what I would feel. She saw that I would become drawn into the life of an eternal soul with a mortal body.”

Trei’s eyes widened, “Like your... Mother.”

“Not strictly speaking my mother.” Alphege teased, “But yes, my ancestor. The founding mother of all elfkind.”

Trei sighed, “I think I begin to comprehend. I resemble something... Sacred, to you. To elfkind.”

“More than just that.” Alphege smiled, “This is F’rir’s work. Her weapon against Vastras’ plans. Plans she failed to disrupt. If my goddess could not stop the actions of the mage, then she would have the last laugh in the end. F’rir ensured that you are the Heir of the Elfin Mother.”

He sat up slowly, “The Heir.”

Alphege bit her cheek. She hadn't meant to say so much. He had a way of making her drop her guard. To make her forget her responsibilities. She was not certain how her people would react if they knew what he was. Who he was. Would they accept that he had a right to know? Or would they demand punishment for her? She could not say.

Trei sighed heavily, "Elfkind have magic, don't they? Most mortals don't... But Astrian was able to teach me. She said it was a skill anyone could learn... But I didn't even remember ever meeting a mage until Rendi brought it up the other day. And the only mage I've ever met is the one who planned my birth."

Alphege laughed quietly, a sound like glass moving in the breeze, "Astrian did lie to you. The only mortals who may use magic are those of mixed bloodlines. Diluted through the ages, but occasionally a resurgence leads to the birth of a mage. There was a time, in ancient history, when all peoples lived in harmony, upon the mortal world. It wasn't always the mortal world. The realms were created... After your kind rejected the gods."

Trei turned in surprise, "We rejected the gods?"

Alphege cocked her head, "You do not know your own history?"

He shrugged, "It isn't something I've ever heard. Maybe a priest might know."

The elf shivered, "Your kind... Rejected the celestials. Waged war against them. Fractured all worlds. Caused each species to seek out a new life in a new world... And it isn't common knowledge? The guilt from that fallout... What was done, was an unforgivable sin. It is why your kind are called mortal. You were once like elfkind. Deathless, ageless."

Trei swore suddenly, and Alphege leapt to her feet, ready to fight. The irritating man just shook his head, "No danger. I just realised something. Sumner created the Fae... And F'rir, elfkind... Our gods created humanity... To try and recreate what mortals were, before that war."

Alphege smiled and nodded, sitting down slowly, "Yes. That is why. It is the reason that Drak'tur created orks, and what the mage Danren was attempting when he forged goblins from the dead of your peoples and mine. It is this original sin that the Paladins of the Lady attempt to absolve by serving their goddess and fighting against magic, the tool that was used by your people to kill the gods. It was this war that lead to the treaty between Fae and Fate."

Trei screwed up his face angrily, "And it's why I was born. Vastras is trying to finish the job. To wipe out the celestials, once and for all."

She didn't say anything, hiding her emotions behind a serene mask, but inwardly Alphege wept at the words. Trei truly hated his existence, and it was justified. He was born to bring about genocide, to complete the original sin that had caused the world to be so broken. The man she felt so deeply for, a man she wished to wrap her arms around, a man she wished would just hold her quietly as they stared at the stars together, it was this man who wished he had never been born. It was this man who grieved so deeply for the woman who had died just because she cared for him.

---

## Ashwen

Ashwen arrived, pulling her jacket tight against the cold. The wind here was blisteringly cold. She could already feel icicles forming against the tips of the wings. She hurried up the stone steps in front of her, and into the castle. This was a place in the nowhere. She wasn't sure how Janus had managed it, creating a realm disconnected from all others. Getting here hadn't been the easiest of things. Navigating the Void. She'd followed his instructions to the letter and still had nearly been pulled back into the lifestream to be reborn.

The castle wasn't much warmer. There were no fires, no insulation. Nothing blocking the gaping holes that acted as windows. The wind howled inside as much as it did outdoors. The stone was rough, unworn. A blue stone of some kind. Cheap, and practical.

Janus had tried to explain to her how he'd made the realm. Something to do with potential energy, sacrifice, and all the coal he'd requisitioned. So far as she could understand it, he'd used the natural magics of his own realm to create a new magic. A costly magic, but one that would not be detectable to the queen or to the fates. From that he'd created this place. A place safe from prying eyes.

A place they could be together, until Janus could resolve this.

She frowned, looking at the empty welcome hall. She'd expected him to be here to greet her, or at least a servant or someone. Not this.

She moved up the hall, and into the first set of stairs that she could find. They lead upwards, up a tower. She flinched as she approached every window, being blasted by cold air that froze her hair. She paused, out of breath, near the top room. It seemed she'd guessed right, there was a fire here.

She stepped inside, "Janus?"

Her voice echoed in the room, and she moved over to the fire rubbing her hands. This seemed like it must have been an interrogation room. There were broken chains against the wall. A chair sitting close by, just in range of the fireplace.

Ashwen felt the colour drain from her face as she saw the dried out bones lying on the floor nearby. The skeleton was Fae. It seemed old. Too old to make sense. There were no unaccounted for Fae in history. There hadn't been that many of them to begin with, just a few thousand.

She cast a spell in the air slowly with a puff of dust, looking at horror at the aura around the body. They'd only been dead a few days. The life had been drained out of them. Torn out of them. The neck was broken. Someone had murdered a Fae, and then drained out their soul and used it for themselves.

A ghoul.

She stared in horror as it slowly dawned on her.

This was Janus.

He was dead.

---



## Luna

Luna moved slowly towards the counter, complaining bitterly to herself with a slurred voice. Rendi was a total lightweight, barely downing a bottle of nectar before he passed out, leaving her alone with a very upset little toddler.

It wasn't fair.

At least she still had Claven to drink with, even if the woman was extremely uninhibited. Luna felt the ground hit her face and she swore loudly, curling into a ball and holding her head. "Ashen voidfall fucking starcrossed ur'kan dhark'trou!"

Claven stifled a giggle nearby, and Luna glared at her angrily as she sat up slowly. "I had no idea you could swear in Ork."

Luna stuck out her tongue, and then looked around for what she'd fallen over, "Orks are stupid. Their language is easy. Good for cursing."

She tried to kick the spear lying near the table, and recoiled in horror, grabbing her foot, "What in the ur'hrk?"

Claven stood up, swaying slowly, "Found something more interesting than me?"

Luna rolled her eyes, "The elf's bloody spear. I can't move it."

The red-eyed woman stumbled over, leaning over and grabbing it drunkenly, and before Luna could wince and move out of the way slammed her face into the ground.

Luna burst out laughing as Claven curled into a ball, hissing.

"I think it's magic or something." Luna got out between laughs, "No way we're shifting it."

Claven grinned, looking up at her, "Want to drink on that?"

Luna flipped upright with a movement of her wings, and snagged the bottle off the counter that she'd been going to get in the first place and took a swig, "Move aside little woman."

She braced her wings against the ground, glaring as the black dust began to glow and turn to smoke across her body, and then Luna bared her fangs and pulled against the spear. She felt rather than saw the aura of the staff in front of her bleed out and into the world. She was no longer pulling against an object but the ground itself.

Her face hit the spear violently.

Luna rolled over groaning and touched her forehead gently, looking in surprised pain at the blood, "Ash. Your turn."

Claven took the bottle and drained it, as Luna glared at her. Then the Fae let out an earth-shattering belch, and spread her hands. Between them there was a sprinkling of flickering green and red lights, and the Fae spoke slowly, "Yggr rasin dai sal!"

The spear snapped upright and into her face, knocking the drunk Fae backwards, landing on her bottom. She winced, rolling over, "Ow!"

Luna's jaw dropped, "How the frick did you do that?"

The spear was upright, poised on the tip of the blade, but unmoving. Claven laughed, sitting up, "Elfin magic. I learned a bit a while back. Basic life and blood crap, mixed with words of power. I just figured the spear came from Yggdrasil if it's that stubborn."

Luna laughed, and stood up, wiping her bloody forehead, “Elfin magic. Huh. Didn’t think I’d see that crap again after the Gardia Catastrophe.”

The door creaked loudly and Luna looked over to see the elf, her ears a bright pink, opening and shutting her hands angrily.

Luna sighed heavily, “Yes, we moved your bloody spear.”

“Drunken oaf.” The elf hissed, storming over and swinging the spear onto her back, “That’s not what I’m pissed about. Gardia. You were there.”

Luna felt her sluggish brain responding slowly, awakening deep and shameful memories, whilst reminding her that the woman in front of her was most definitely not drunk. “Uh...”

The elf slapped her, hard. Luna hit the ground on her knees as her forehead hit the ground with a solid and rather painful thwack. She grabbed her head with both hands and kicked rapidly, waiting for the pain to subside. The Fae breathed heavily, “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I fucking killed everyone of you stupid little ageless ur’kan. I’m sorry that none of you gave me an ashen choice!”

The elf spun on her heel and left, her aura a violent mix of death and worse. Luna felt a tinge of regret. Wasn’t her fault the elf had decided to have this argument when she couldn’t control herself.

Luna lay back on the cold floor, closing her eyes and begging the throbbing in her skull to subside. She felt something warm wrap around her, and she opened her eyes to find Claven snuggled up against her, and apparently already asleep.

The princess peered blearily around the room, and smiled as she saw Astrian snuggled into Rendi, passed out on the couch with phallic emblems inked across his forehead.

She let herself fall, trying to fall into sleep and forget.

A tear slipped down one cheek.

---

## Trei

He rubbed his eyes tiredly as the light streamed into the room. He could smell a nearby fire, and her.

His heart took a punch. Summer was gone.

This was her home, and it didn't feel right with her gone, but here, under the blanket and in the morning light, he could almost believe she was still here. He squeezed his eyes shut, sobbing silently as the tears streamed down his face. He couldn't even pretend.

His thoughts were an endless spiral, looking at her face, so happy and free, and then... She was gone. Lying face down, bleeding. Vastras crouched beside her, holding her heart.

Trei rolled over and punched the bed in frustration. There was an explosion of feathers, and he heard someone coughing.

He sat up, looking around in embarrassment, but didn't see anything. He frowned and looked up slowly in confusion and his eyes widened in surprise.

Alphege was lying on one of the rafters, coughing and waving her hand at the feathers. Her eyes were dull, and her blonde hair had changed to a motley brown. The elf yawned tiredly, and looked down at him, "Huh. So this was your room?"

Trei blushed, suddenly aware he was topless and yanked the blanket up around him, "Eh... Yeah."

She looked pointedly at the bed, "Nice temper you have there."

He winced, looking away.

There was a solid thud as the elf dropped onto the floor, and she stretched, her loose-fitting white shirt and pants revealing nothing, thankfully. Trei had walked in on too many naked women at this point, he was glad of some modesty.

The elf picked up a solid breastplate from the floor, and put it across her shoulders, "Mind tightening the straps for me?"

Trei stood up awkwardly, quickly pulling on his shirt, but not delaying to button it, and walked over pulling on the leather straps.

"Tighter." Alphege laughed, "I'm not made of glass."

He cinched it some more, spying the crease marks and locked the straps in place. "Is that thing heavy?"

Alphege shrugged, turning around and pulling on her vambraces, tightening each with a pull of her teeth, "Wouldn't make much sense if they weren't."

She slung her spear across her back and smiled, "There we go, all dressed."

Trei frowned, uncertain whether to ask, and the elf raised an eyebrow, "Speak up, mortal."

"Your hair."

Alphege pulled a strand in front of her eyes and sighed heavily, "Oh."

Trei fumbled as he began doing up the buttons on his shirt, "It means something?"

"Magic problems." Alphege replied esoterically.

She punched his shoulder lightly, only mildly bruising him, and walked out into the hallway, "Get a move on, mortal. We have work to do."

---

## Luna

Luna poked the fire tiredly, holding a piece of ice crystal against her forehead, and turned slowly as the two entered the room, and felt her heart skip a beat.

Whilst she'd been passed on the floor, indulging Claven, the elf had been with Trei. They'd clearly slept in the same room. What else had she missed? Had the elf made her move? Comforting him in his grief?

She bared her fangs, "Morning."

The elf frowned, looking around the room, "Must you use so much magic just to get up?"

Luna rolled her eyes and tossed a crystal to the elf who caught it off-hand, "Summer made these."

The elf held it up, looking at it carefully, "This isn't... This is pure."

Luna smiled, "Oh, one step behind are we? Summer merged with the lifestream earlier, to separate this realm and try and hide Trei from Janus. Yio interfered, witch that she is, and Trei lost his body. Summer came back and... Parts of her were made of these."

The elf sat down beside the fire, rubbing her hands, "So. Summer was dying."

Trei stumbled, and Luna flinched. "Yes."

He stood over her and she looked up as sweetly as she could, "She didn't want you to know."

"I'm... I was her bride." He spoke angrily, clearly fighting back tears, and Luna sighed, grabbing his hand and squeezing, "I know."

A flash of images cascaded across her hungover brain and Luna let go, grabbing her skull and biting back a string of curse words that might just have ruptured a hole in reality. She breathed through it, slowly calming herself, and then looked over at the elf staring at her, "I imprinted on him. So I get bloody future visions any time I touch him."

Trei crouched in front of her, "Luna. Is it different?"

She blinked, her foggy brain stretching and beginning to move, and she smiled slowly, "No... How can that be? I see you, and Summer. I saw Summer, her wings burning. That hasn't happened yet."

The elf clapped her hands together excitedly, and Luna glared daggers at her, "Some of us are not morning people."

The elf rolled her eyes, "Some of you are mass murderers who got drunk last night."

Trei put a hand on the elf's shoulder, "Alphege. We're all on the same side here, aren't we?"

The elf flicked a glance at him, and Luna felt her heart dying a little more. So there was something between the two of them. It wasn't just her imagination. Even though neither of the two seemed to be aware, they were bound together and pulling closer. It was inevitable. Again. Just like with Summer.

Luna swallowed nervously, "Mass murder... What did we talk about last night?"

"You mentioned Gardia, offhand." The elf snapped, "I remember you, now. You were there."

Luna sank backwards into the chair, wrapping her wings across her chest, "Oh."

Trei frowned, "What happened at Gardia?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Luna whispered, and he sat on the couch next to the elf, "If this is going to be a problem between you two, maybe you should."

She cringed and squeezed her eyes shut, "I don't know. Maybe three hundred years ago, now. An elf was making a lot of noise, preparing for war. Claiming that all other races were inferior and needed to be eradicated."

"Alfwerd."

Luna nodded slowly, "He was a problem for everyone. Summer decided we should launch a preemptive attack."

Trei glanced at the elf, "Was he a friend of yours?"

"No." Alphege hissed, revealing her teeth. They were straight, apart from the upper canines the curved downwards as fangs the rested against the bottom of the elf's jaw. "I nearly killed him, twice, but both times he escaped and I ended up on my deathbed."

Luna sighed, "Janus gave me the location, Trei. For an all-out preemptive attack. He was wrong."

Trei turned white slowly, "What do you mean he was wrong?"

"Six hundred and twelve children." Alphege whispered, "Thousands of men and women. Dead, by Fae hands. It was a bloodbath. They never stood a chance."

Luna smiled weakly at Trei, not knowing what to say, and then turned and stared into the fire, not saying a word. What could she say? Nothing would make up for what had happened, or change the fact she was the one in charge of the attack. It was their blood on her hands. It was her fault that she'd failed to realise in time. It was her fault she hadn't been able to reign in the attack before the elves had become desperate. Before they'd launched their counterattack.

None of them had survived. It had dissolved into a bloody kill-or-be-killed disaster.

Luna paused, glancing up, "You said you were there? How did you survive?"

Alphege tapped the spear she'd rested beside her, "I was pulled back to Yggdrasil to recover, after you rammed a sword through my throat."

Trei sighed painfully, and the elf put a hand on his knee, "It's fine, Trei. I have sworn an oath to help you, and this woman."

Luna twitched, fighting her instincts, "Can you... Avoid touching him?"

Alphege laughed, "Still feisty, then?"

Trei winced, "Luna... Even now?"

She threw up her hands in frustration, "Yes. Even now. Even when I miss my sister, and I just want her back. Imprinting is a curse, Trei. My body chemistry is fighting tooth and nail to make me claim you. Every hormone is out of balance. I just... Want... You."

She burst into tears and buried her face in the couch.

It wasn't like she wanted to feel this way.

She didn't have a choice. From the first moment, when she'd seen Trei standing there dumbfounded in his underwear. She'd wanted to pounce on him, then and there. She'd blushed and ran because her thoughts had gone down a road they never had with anyone ever before. She'd slept with three Fae in the past. No relationship had lasted particularly long, a couple decades at most.

Yet, here was this mortal, and she instantly wanted to devote her entire life to him. Willing to break any rule, do anything necessary, to keep him.

It scared her.

She froze as she felt his hand pat her head. "We'll be okay, Luna."

The princess pulled out of her cocoon slowly, and smiled weakly. "Easier said than done. Now, elf, how do we kill Vastras?"

"We don't." Alphege replied, "If we do, the lifestream will be gone forever. Vastras linked it to herself. We have to keep the mortal alive. Instead, we bind her soul. Put it inside a crystal. Then, we can restore the lifestream, at least for a few thousand years. Time enough to find a way to release the lifestream."

Luna considered it, "Torture her with a living nightmare for a few thousand years? Sounds like fun. How?"

The elf shrugged, "Unfortunately, it requires mental skills beyond your own."

Luna rolled her eyes, "So that's why F'rir ensured Astrian's memories remained at her rebirth."

"Correct." The elf yawned, "Got any food?"

Luna snapped her fingers and Enri appeared with several plates. He began passing out prepared meals, and warm tea. "Continue."

"We need to age Astrian. Bring her mental maturity up to our level, if not also her body." Alphege shrugged, "F'rir seemed certain that it would not present a problem."

Luna shrugged, "Not really. Madam Claven?"

The red-eyed Fae paused, choking on a roll, "It is simple. Not usually recommended as it shortens the lifespan of the current cycle. Basically a feedback loop of temporal magic inside the brain forces Astrian to relive all her lives. Her body won't age, but her mind will be fully restored."

Trei nodded his thanks as he took a small plate of rounded steaks, and then frowned, "That's going to make some problems, isn't it?"

The elf glanced sideways at him as she took a saucer filled with what looked like bread chunks, "How so?"

"Astrian is still imprinted on me." Trei replied, "it's awkward enough when she acts possessive as a child. It'll be worse if she actually is an adult but with the body of a child."

Luna shrugged, "She'll need to show self control."

"You can't stop yourself." Trei shot back, "With a child's hormones? Astrian won't stand a chance. And if she is an erratic half-child, then she could be a danger to all of us, no matter what we do."

Alphege nodded slowly, "That is a problem. I hadn't considered it."

Claven raised a hand timidly, and Luna smiled, "This isn't a classroom."

"We have another option. We could... Imprint Astrian's memories onto another, compatible, brain structure. It is more difficult, but should be possible."

Trei smiled at her, "You know how?"

Claven shrugged sheepishly, "I am the Faen Council historian. Most magic has at some time or another been entered into our records."

“And you memorised it?” Trei asked in surprise, and Luna burst out laughing, “Fae don’t tend to write things down, Trei. We’re a magic society, not a physical one.”

Claven shrugged, “I store the memories of all previous historians. When it gets close to my time to be reborn, I’ll pass those memories on to my successor. It’s the same process, or half of it, that I’m proposing we could do to get Astrian’s knowledge of mental magics.”

Alphege frowned, “Astrian is known as not merely an adept, but a prodigy. Her understanding is second to none, and her creativity allows her to invent new processes that few could imagine. I’m not certain replacing her will result in the same chance of success.”

Luna shrugged, “What does the psychic need to do, in this plan of yours?”

“To forge an intimate connection between, crystal, lifestream, Vastras and the caster.” Alphege shrugged, “This seems to be something that relies on skill, rather than knowledge.”

“Soul binding.” Trei said in surprise, and Alphege looked at him, “You’ve thought of something, mortal?”

He laughed and shrugged, “I can bind souls. At least my own. That’s thanks to what Astrian taught me. I’m a beginner, for certain. If I can do it, then someone else should be able to. I guess the hard part is that Vastras will be fighting back.”

Luna shook her head, “Not as easy as you make it look, Trei. Being able to jump from one body, to another, isn’t... You might only be able to do it because you died. Because your soul already learned how to let go.”

Alphege sipped her tea slowly, considering the situation.

Luna looked over at the black-eyed man, and frowned. His new body looked almost identical to his old at this point. Trei could reforge living flesh to meet his own needs. His own belief of reality reshaped it, and she didn’t think he was even aware of it. He didn’t have a huge magical aura, about the equal of the average Fae, which meant that in this room he was dwarfed. Yet, if he could shift reality this easily, rewriting organic tissue with just his subconscious... His skill was more than he knew. In fact, it was downright terrifying. His belief of how the world should be should not be able to change things this quickly, not with the trickle of mana he had available to him.

It had to be something else. Something to do with his connection with the celestials. Trei was designed by Vastras to be the bane of the celestials. He had to have some sort tangible connection with them. Something that forced every single person who was even part celestial to fall madly in love with him. He tangled their threads of fate with his mere presence. That was it.

Luna stood up, painting a series of symbols in the air quickly, “Trei, stay still. I want to check something.”

Alphege leaned away from him, muttering some complaint about how little magic was left in the world. Luna didn’t particularly care. They needed to know, and this was the only way they’d be able to find out.

The writing fixed, and Luna flinched as the spell rebounded. Having just a moment to think how much it would hurt before she was blown backwards across the room.

She landed on her feet, arms and wings in front of her face, skidding to a stop. She let her guard down and smiled slowly as the others looked over at her in surprise.

Alphege tore off some bread, “Well, that looked like a failure.”

Luna shook her head, walking over and downing her entire glass of nectar quickly, “Not a



failure. Success. Trei, I know what Vastras did to you. Why you effect all of us the way you do.”

---

## Claven

She looked at her mistress in apprehension. She was grateful that the mistress might know how to detangle herself from the mortal, but she knew that Luna would become even less interested in Claven afterwards. The spark of romance in the woman was the only spark she had. Without Trei, she would revert to the cold-hearted warrior of the realms who was willing to do all that was necessary.

Luna sat down next to her, “Basically, Trei, you are a Fate. Just like Yio claimed. She just didn’t tell us everything, and tried to make us believe she did it, rather than... How do I explain this simply? What Vastras did, to kickstart the whole thing, was make you... Lucky.”

Trei shook his head, “Nope.”

“The universe is full of chance.” Luna shrugged, “Tiny random events that are so small and shortlived they can hardly be said to have occurred at all. As an example, the smallest fragment of magical energy lives for less than a moment, and is too small to be observed except by magical means. Every fragment at that scale has its own set of forces that act on it. They don’t interact with physics yet, that requires more of them, joined together. Each of these tiny fragments has a random chance of the colour they will be. When you group them, one colour wins out and converts all the others.”

“Like you have black dust.” Trei nodded slowly, “So around you, most of these fragments get converted to black, and that causes the rest to follow.”

“Yes.” The mistress nodded, “Claven here, is red magic. The elf is... Elfin magic. A mix of blue and green.”

Trei frowned, “And me?”

“An exactly even distribution.” Luna said incredulously, and Claven started, “What?”

Alphege elbowed Trei playfully, “That means you have the potential to use all magic, mortal. That is... Beyond rare.”

Luna nodded, “You forced random events to become evenly distributed, which doesn’t happen in the real world. That’s your presence. You eliminate random chance just by existing. This makes you look lucky, because you can’t have bad luck.”

Trei shrugged, “Not seeing the connection to Fates yet.”

Claven interrupted, unable to contain herself, “You effect every circumstance around you, Master Trei. If a Fate decreed something, and you came along, your presence would disrupt their efforts. In doing so, the tendrils of fate that they create, their influence and will, would become tangled around you. Permanently.”

Luna shot her a glare, “What she said. You tangle up the Fates, which makes their stuff bleed off into you. Like when the Fates decreed that I would have a soulmate one day, you stumbled into that tendril of Fate and it got stuck on you. When the Fates decreed the ending of this realm, you walked in, and now you get to decide whether it will rise or fall.”

Trei looked at the mistress with concern, “So... Does that mean I can release your imprint? Let you go?”

“No.” Luna winced, “Sorry, but you kinda like me. So long as there’s any attraction, your subconscious is still going to control my fate.”

Claven looked down at her food sadly. The mortal did like her mistress. And if he began to hate her, then fate itself would simply begin to hurt her. There was no middle ground to be had. Perhaps an endless unrequited love was better for the mistress.

She really did have no hope of winning her heart.

The room was silent for a time, and then Trei spoke, "If I am a Fate, or have the power of fate anyway... Does that mean I can do what we wanted Astrian to?"

Claven nodded quietly, "You will always succeed, if it is your heart's desire."

Alphege stood up, stretching, "Well then, historian. I think you have some memories to fetch. Mortal, I would spar with you. We must ensure you are prepared for the battle ahead."

They left, and Luna sat down beside her, an arm around her shoulders, "I did tell you we can never be together, Claven. All I'll do is hurt you. You deserve more than that."

She looked up, her red eyes peering into her silver ones, "I don't care. I know you can be a heartless monster, mistress. You are the Shadow Knight. I am just... I am unable to change my heart. I am drawn to you, as inexplicably as you are drawn to the mortal. I was to be your assassin. I have never felt this way about you before, despite countless council meetings. I trained under you, before Hero came and burned our world. Even then, when you were a goddess unto us, I felt nothing for you beyond admiration. Yet now, my heart is plagued. I can see no point in any future where you are not."

Luna sighed heavily, "Your heart is lonely. Can you swear to me that this is anything more than infatuation, Claven?"

The woman looked away from the intensity of the woman she cared for and shrugged. "I have known lust before. Ash, I even slept with a mortal once. This feels different. I don't care if I get your body or not. All I want is you. You sitting beside me gives me the same palpitations that a kiss might have with someone from my past. I just want to be near you. To have you know me."

"I could not curse you, with knowing me." Luna insisted, "I am not a Fae, Claven. I am a murderer. An executioner. A butcher. Death is the only work made by my hands. I have killed Fae. I bound an entire army of Fae to my own soul's command. Rendi doesn't serve me because he wants to, he wants to because I want him to. I took his will and stripped it away. Can you claim I deserve life? What would I do to you, given half a chance?"

Claven looked up at the silver-haired woman, at her gaze and guilt, at the anger burning there against herself. She did the only thing she could think of.

Her lips met hers, and for a brief moment there was an explosion of light, and Claven felt whole. As if all her anxiety evaporated, as if there wasn't a pending battle against someone who had managed to kill the future of all Fae. She felt Luna relax into her. For a brief moment.

The princess pulled away, standing and spinning away from her quickly.

Claven flinched.

She probably shouldn't have done it. It certainly wouldn't alleviate Luna's fears and hatred towards herself. She just couldn't stand to have someone so beautiful and wonderful direct so much rage inwards.

"You took a chance." Luna whispered quietly, her voice hoarse.

Claven ran a hand through her red hair nervously, not knowing what was going to happen next. Her heart was in her throat, and she was half-expecting Luna to knock her flying. Which was sort

of what the problem was. Luna didn't know if she could be a decent Faen.

"You have no idea what just did, do you?"

Claven pulled her knees up to her chin, wishing she could run and hide, but that wouldn't help anything. It could only make things worse. "I'm sorry."

Luna spun around, tears running down her face, "Don't be. Don't. Please."

Claven cocked her head, not understanding.

"It's you. It has always been you." Luna said slowly, in astonishment. "Claven. Please. Tell me you saw it."

The Fae shrugged sheepishly, "I saw light."

"Stupid little magicless..." Luna muttered angrily and then took a deep breath, "Sorry. You've managed to unbalance me. I have no idea what I'm going to do. None. I'm not tied to Trei."

Claven's eyes widened, "What do you mean?"

"He's just a mortal to me, now." Luna shrugged, "Attractive but... You untangled the red string. My fate, and his, is now unbound. The only way, the only way that makes any sense at all is if..."

Claven stood up slowly, "You're not pushing me away?"

Luna grinned at her, "I'd say we need to test this. Make sure you really are the one for me."

Claven stood nervously, suddenly feeling gawky and awkward, whilst Luna put her arms around her, breathing in her scent as she pulled her close.

Their lips met.

Light exploded inside Claven's head, and she felt the world around her falling away. As if she were being drawn into somewhere new, into something new. It wasn't alike to anything she knew. Her arms moved around Luna's waist, pulling her closer, as she felt Luna's tongue enter her mouth, dancing across the tops of her fangs.

They fell backwards onto the couch, Luna easily pinning her hips as the passion between them went from something quiet and fragile into something ravenous.

Claven's fingers drew down Luna's back, causing her to break the kiss with a shallow gasp. Teeth brushed against Claven's neck, and she pulled Luna in.

---

## Rendi

He closed the door as quietly as he could, dragging the Faeling who was trying to fly back inside.

Astrian pouted, crossing her arms and sitting on the doormat.

He sighed heavily, patting his pockets for amber, and then held one up, “Only if you don’t go back inside until I say you can.”

The Faeling considered his request, and then shook her head.

Rendi rolled his eyes, “Two?”

“Tree.” Astrian stated flatly, as if there was no possible way he had three pieces of dried tree sap on him, when he was in a garden filled with trees.

“Three it is.” He replied, and held them out.

Astrian grabbed them and ran, moving off into the garden. Rendi signalled and two of the other assassins moved ahead to scout and shadow the Faeling. He’d called them all in after Luna had arrived in the garden, after Summer’s death.

He couldn’t afford for the same situation to happen again.

He paused, watching as the elf danced, spear in hand, weaving circles around the clumsy oaf that was the key to all of this. How could such an ineffective fighter be their hope? How could he have the power to change the world around himself?

This untrained idiot was akin to a god?

The assassin shook his head as he moved towards them, yawning tiredly. Then he paused. He’d misjudged the situation. The elf truly was spectacular to behold. The spear moved as one with her, and there was never a chance that the mortal could strike her. Yet, neither could she land a single blow against him. Every blow was blocked with disproportionate strength. The mortal knocked aside a deadly aim as it were not delivered with the full force that the elf had available to her.

The ground beneath both fighters was torn and shredded where each of them had planted their feet before being knocked backwards by the other.

Alphege paused, breathing heavily, and waved a hand, “Come to do better, assassin?”

He coughed as a squeal emitted from the cabin in the background, and the elf rolled her eyes, “About time.”

Trei looked from one to the other, “Is Luna okay?”

“Yes.” Rendi spoke very quickly, and raised his hands, “Let us see what you can do against knives, mortal.”

He spun tossing two knives and using his wings to get a burst of speed, circling behind the mortal and tossing two more. As he did, his eyes widened as he saw the first two knives already heading in his direction. The mortal was fast. Faster than he could see.

He deflected all four blades before they impaled him, watching the mortal in surprise. He wasn’t sweating, nor breathing heavier than normal, despite already having fought the elf. “Are you not trying to hurt me?”

Trei shrugged, “You’re my ally.”

“You will have to try.” Rendi growled angrily, trying not to be distracted as another inappropriate sound pierced the air, and tossed a knife before the mortal could ask another awkward question.

As he did, Rendi slipped through the cracks of the dimensions, emerging above the mortal to toss half a dozen blades straight down. He paused midair, flinching as he heard a cracking sound.

Rendi plummeted to the ground, unable to breathe as the pain overwhelmed him.

He glanced to the right, staring in astonishment at what was left of his wing. The sound had been a knife piercing it at an ungodly speed. No. A godly speed. A speed fast enough to breach the sound barrier, and blow away the fragments of something that was not nearly as fragile as it looked.

Alphege fell beside him, her spear slamming into the ground. "What was done, is undone."

Rendi hissed through his fangs as his wing seemed to reconstruct itself out of fragments in the air, and then he sat upright, looking at the mortal in astonishment, "If you can bring that against our enemies, we might stand a chance."

Trei nodded politely.

He should have expected it, really. The body might look like the mortal now, but it was once his master's. If the mortal could reshape a Fae's physical shell, one that had been at the peak of physical capability, then he would reshape it into something better. Something more.

The knife hit the ground nearby, and Rendi shook his head, "You threw that?"

Trei shook his head, "Nah. I'm punched it back at you."

Alphege raised an eyebrow, "How? The assassin hadn't yet emerged back into this dimension. How did you know where he would be?"

Trei shrugged, "It's where I thought he would be. Wasn't it obvious?"

"No." Alphege replied and sighed, "Luck. You managed to force the assassin to take the route you wanted him to. Astonishing."

Rendi bit of his angry retort that it was more painful than surprising.

---

## Vastras

“Put down the sword.” She growled as the paladin approached, “You really don’t want me to stop what I’m doing. The rebound might well take out the entire world.”

The soldier lowered his sword carefully, “What are you doing, witch?”

“Finishing what I started.” Vastras spat, “Paladin, tell me, what is the original sin?”

The soldier scoffed, “Magic. Man stole from the gods, and used it to fight them, to kill them.”

“Yes.” Vastras smiled, “But not anymore. Not ever again. I have taken the lifestream of a celestial. With it, I am cutting off all magic, to the entire world.”

The paladin changed his stance slightly, “Why desecrate the dead?”

She was standing over the Pit. A place on the edge of Calis where the dead were gathered for burning. Where they had always been gathered for burning. A place of deep sacrifice. “So many lives have been sacrificed here over the years. It became a focal point of magic in this world, stronger than any shrine ever was. I will not give mankind back to the gods by desecrating their dwelling places. So I forged one.”

---

## Luna

“Ash!” Luna screamed going bright red for a moment before she collapsed.

Claven wrapped her wings around her, and Luna smiled over at her similarly red face as the two just sat there breathing hard for a moment.

“So.” Luna managed.

Claven traced a finger across her stomach, “You’re a screamer.”

Luna was happy her face was already flushed, and then winced. “Oh crap. Everyone heard, didn’t they?”

The redhead buried her head into the couch, “Oh.”

Luna smiled playfully, “I guess I can’t call you Faeling, anymore.”

“Clothes, milady.” Came the deadpan intonations of Enri, and Luna glared as she tilted her head back to see who was behind her, “Enri!”

The Fae butler’s mouth twitched into a smile for a moment, gone so quickly she wasn’t sure it was there. He indicated the shredded black dress lying nearby, “I thought it would be unfortunate if you lacked appropriate attire. Have I overstepped?”

“You watched.” Luna growled angrily, glaring, and the butler said nothing. No attempt to defend or deflect. The bastard had actually watched. Well. He was certainly out of a job then. She might be convinced to let him live, considering how long he’d served her. Maybe. “Go, away.”

The butler stepped into the shimmering air, back to her realm. Luna quickly sat up, snatching the dress from beside the couch and yanking it over her head. She glanced over at Claven who was sitting up, and covering herself awkwardly. Luna sighed, “I bet he’s watching again.”

Claven shrugged. Luna wanted to kick herself. The woman was feeling out of sorts. Not like her dress was in better condition. She needed some clothes, and Luna had acted to protect herself first. She wanted this to work. She wanted Claven to feel like the most important thing in her life.

Luna snapped her fingers, and a black and white dress covered in ruffles shot from down the hallway, she held it out gently, “I had this made for the wedding. I’m not sure of the fit, but maybe...”

Claven smiled taking it as she trailed off, “You still don’t know my sizes? After that?”

Luna blushed, “I was thinking about other things.”

Claven grinned broadly as she slipped the dress on, “I’m not sure I was thinking. Not enough time for that.”

The princess raised an eyebrow, “Came out of our shell a bit.”

“You’re going to regret kissing me.”

Luna grabbed her and leaned her over, planting a kiss. The hunger in her chest stirred and she found herself sitting on the couch, Claven’s arms around her, making out.

Claven broke the kiss. “I guess not. But I’m guessing the others might be a tad...”

Luna laughed, smiling at her, “I think we both need a shower. And the room needs to air.”

She rolled her red eyes and stood up, “I guess.”

---



## Azrael

His sword flashed in front of him, and the paladin felt the stone beneath his feet implode as the ghoul struck him. The flaming tongues burning in the sockets of the man seared into him. They showed intelligence he wasn't accustomed to seeing in the resurrected dead. He shouldn't be surprised, this thing had been left to defend Vastras' home. Her seat of magic.

It was strong, and fast. Faster than he had expected could be possible. He ducked to the side as he felt the sword blade shatter, spinning and slicing with the fractured handle, tearing into the side of the ghoul with a burst of rotten blood. Azrael pushed backwards, tossing a spell urgently to move him out of the way in time. The ghoul crashed into the ground with a shatter of stone fragments, turning to him, growling angrily as blood poured from the wound he'd opened.

This wasn't right.

Every ghoul he'd ever fought had been a rage-driven monster of instinct, true enough, but there had been something more. This one was intelligent, predicting his moves and able to defend against his magic, but it wasn't speaking. It wasn't trying to get inside his head, or threaten him. Whatever soul that possessing it didn't have full control of the body. It was just along for the ride.

He had to find a way to disable the body. If he could force the mind to take control, he could deceive it long enough that he could slay it. The mind was vulnerable, the monster outside was not. It would keep going, no matter what damage he did to it.

---

## Ashwen

It felt strange to be back home, in the empty house where Lord Ashwith had raised her. A house of knowledge, magic, and love. A quiet place of contemplation and reflection. A place where you could learn to be who you needed to be. Learn to be what you needed to be.

She'd finally learned that lesson.

Finally realised what she needed to be to finish this. There was only one answer. The Fae would go to war. There was no other alternative. The queen had claimed the life of the Arbiter, and yet she hadn't called for a cessation of hostilities. She was still mobilising her armies. Still pretending Janus was alive. He had become nothing more than a scapegoat to her.

Janus had been right. The ghoul was a weapon, an object of discord. His existence was for one purpose, and for one alone. To enable Summer and the Fates to move openly against the Fae. She couldn't accept that. Ashwen would be damned if she would allow Fae to turn against Fae for nothing more than their own selfish benefits. She would not forget the memory of the man who had loved her. She would not soil his memory by bowing down to the tyrant the queen had become.

This house was empty, but the call had gone out.

Every councillor had heard the call.

There was only one choice, and this savagery would not be permitted to continue. Ashwen would take her weapons to war, and fight, Fae against Fae. She would kill and maim for her belief. The queen was no longer fit to rule. Ashwen was going to take back the Evening Realms for the Fae. She would take back the hidden realms of the various Fae. She would capture the queen, she would try her, and she would stand at the queen's execution.

---

## Yio

She frowned, feeling strange.

It was surprising.

She hadn't been expecting to feel anything at all, let alone as if she were floating in sunlight, the aura around her growing and wrapping around her.

She felt her eyes open slowly, and held up her hands in the rays of light. She thought she cocked an eyebrow, but considering the skin on her arms was still forming over the flesh and bones, she could not be certain. She couldn't tell where she was yet, her vision was blurred, and tapered off from a very short distance.

The ground rose up, touching her feet, and the light vanished.

Yio collapsed forward onto her face with a violent thud. She moaned, dragging her tired and weak arms up, but she might as well not have. She couldn't push herself upright at all. She was too weak. It was absolutely pathetic.

"Yes, you are."

She looked upright, through the sun-streaked vision, and rubbed her ear, "Still a bit tinny. Is that you, Sarin?"

"Yes, sister." The eldest replied, "I thought it was about time to bring you back. I can't believe you let Summer kill you."

Yio pushed with all her strength and rolled onto her back, closing her newborn eyes, "I had to preserve the treaty. They're going to need our help, soon. That battle is... Unusual."

"Fixed, but unfixed." Sarin replied, "The battle must happen, but the outcome is unclear, and most outcomes are undesirable. You will play a role, as will I. The only lacking is F'rir, but her death is yet unchanged. We cannot risk restoring her, not with the mage keeping a hold of her essence."

Yio sighed, tiredly lifting an arm into the sky, which immediately dropped and hit her in the face, "I have a tough time seeing how I'm going to be able to assist."

Sarin laughed, "Assist? Sister you are walking chaos. You never help. You stormed off naked to see one of the most powerful and important creatures in the 'verses because you were jealous he got himself a girlfriend."

Yio ground her flat teeth. Her sister was right, of course. She was incredibly jealous. She wanted Trei all for herself, even though she knew it was beyond impossible. After all, she had predicted her own death, and the next she knew would happen was his.

"Do they know Summer survived?" Yio asked guardedly, and Sarin scoffed, "Survived? The queen was killed. Her heart carved out."

Yio grinned, "Ooh. I know something you don't know, doo dah, doo dah! I know something Sarin doesn't, doo dah day!"

Her sister's shadow stretched over her, and Yio grinned, "Seriously, did you not notice?"

"What did the queen do, Yio!?" Sarin demanded angrily, and Yio waved a hand tiredly, "Her soul kinda skipped ship. She needed a body in a hurry, and she knew where to find one that didn't mind a dead soul."

Sarin stepped on her arm painfully, “Explain, Yio. If Summer screws with my plans again, I might just start this timeline over.”

Yio winced, “Ow. Easy. Summer just found Trei’s corpse. Technically, his second corpse after I knocked him out of the first and Summer disassembled it when building the second.”

Sarin relaxed, “Ah. Then there isn’t a problem. The mortals are about to kill that one.”

---

## Luna

Luna sat quietly under the tree, watching Trei and Alphege fighting. The elf was amazing. She moved as fluidly and quickly as the wind, you couldn't tell where she ended and the spear in her hand began. She didn't run and jump. She danced. Her every motion was full of grace and consideration. Her every attack caused the air to ripple and crack from the impact.

She shook her head, grabbing a leaf from above her and feeding to the woman lying in her lap, "I can't believe Trei is keeping up with her."

Claven took the leaf, munching and snuggled into her some more, "I can't believe seeing him restored your bloody bond."

Luna looked down at her, "So long as you're touching me, ours is intact. This is just temporary. Besides, I'm not biased. Trei actually is keeping up with the damn Guardian of Alfheimr. For a guy who couldn't even walk when he got here, that's amazing."

Claven stuck out her tongue, clearly jealous of the attention. She couldn't blame her. It was just how it was with Fae. An imprint was an irrepressible desire. Having two at the same time was confusing as hell for Luna. She was jealous of herself. Angry that she liked them both. How dare she hold one above the other? Other nonsensical thoughts flowed like a river. It was a paradox. An imprint held that person as the centre of the universe. Holding two beliefs of that nature simultaneously was a dichotomy.

Astrian poked her in the arm, and Luna looked over at the Faeling in surprise, "You had fun at the waterfall?"

"No." Astrian growled angrily, shaking her head with frustration. She didn't have the language skills to say what she wanted to say. Luna held out a hand, "Do you want to show me something?"

Astrian nodded, but didn't take her hand.

Luna swallowed, "Are you trying to warn me? That this is going to be bad?"

The Faeling just nodded her head slowly, eyes wide.

Luna gritted her teeth and nodded, "Show me."

It barely took a moment after the Faeling touched her hand, and Luna shot to her feet, dislodging Claven, "Prepare yourselves!"

Alphege spun to look at her in confusion, and Trei paused, breathing hard and leaning on his knees.

Rendi materialised with a half dozen assassins, and Luna tossed dust into the air, spinning and tossing up warding spells by the dozen. As she did the air around them erupted into flames. The air itself sheared open into dozens of portals, and men and women in armour poured through, brandishing weapons and screaming war cries.

Humans.

They were under attack.

---

## Azrael

Steel bites the air. Dust blasts backwards with a roar of flame. Trees are burned and dying. His broken sword turns flesh inside out, blood fills the air. The scent of ash and death is all pervasive. The world around him moves slowly, painfully.

Azrael braced himself as he saw the rock shrapnel headed towards him, his sword arm still drifting upwards and into the black-clothed Fae. The rocks penetrated his face, tearing at him with a distant feeling of sharpness. The blade struck him, jerking almost to a halt, before his flexing arms drove it suddenly deeper and through the Fae as if he were carving apart a steak.

The creature screamed in agony, arching backwards as the chest broke open, spewing the sulphuric contents into the air.

Azrael spun, slicing the screaming throat whilst turning to face his next opponent. This shade lasted no longer than the last. They were skilled warriors, in both magic and weaponry. Knives and swords, arrows and fireballs. The air was filled with weaponry attempting to strip his soul from his body. The paladin however, was not merely a warrior. He was the god-appointed avatar of Sarin. Magic snuffed out as it came close to him. Wards failed as he attacked. He took the magic of his enemy and split it apart, rendering each fibre down to the smallest fragments, returning them to the lifestream, and to Vastras.

Since his rebirth he had dreamed of a day when magic was destroyed, when mankind could once again raise their eyes to the stars in pride. When they could set forth on behalf of the gods that they served with loyalty. The day was at hand. Today was the rebirth of an entire race. It was the penance for the original sin. Today mankind rejoined the heavens, made pure through the blood spilt in this world, on these grounds. Every death consecrated the sacrifice, and brought them closer to ending it, once and for all.

Azrael grabbed a Fae who knocked aside his sword, seizing the creature's jaw and ripping it free of the skull with a flex, tossing aside the incredulous and weakened creature to fall and be trampled in the battle.

---

## Trei

Trei moved through the garden slowly, every footfall certain.

Soldiers and knights moved against him, swords flashing in the air and breaking as he raised his arms to block their strikes. The skin split open, bleeding from the lashings of the enemy, but that's all it was to him. The punishment he had received as a child was no more than this.

He had no weapon, nor a need of one. Every blade broke, and a moment later the shards were driven through the steel of the helmet, through the skin of the screaming creature, silencing as it pierced the skull.

His anger was overflowing. These had once been his people, and he had until this moment thought of himself as human. Not anymore. Not if this is what being human meant. Attacking a world that kept to itself. Attacking a family, resting, without provocation. He knew what this was, and what it meant. The best of humanity had returned to them, and they had welcomed them with open arms. Vastras was what humanity desired. Unending destruction against all who were not friends. A pre-emptive strike to kill the gods. The mage might believe she was the avatar of good, but as would all of these men and women.

Most would be conscripted, and yet they would believe in the ideals of the men put in charge of them, expecting that their naive belief in truth and justice would preserve their life in battle.

Trei punched through folded steel, through rib cage and grasped the spine, tearing free a handful of bones. The knight gasped falling backwards. As they did the helmet fell aside, revealing the bloodied and dying woman. Her eyes were empty and cold, already fading. Her hair was stained with blood, and she whispered to the air as she died silently.

He blocked the coming attack from the side easily, looking down at the woman in surprise.

He felt no guilt, nor anger. He felt no need for apologies or retribution. His actions were his own, and justified. Her actions were her own, and justified. This was the calm of battle, and of war. This was the brutality that he had tried to forget for so long. He had hid from the wars in the blacksmith's shop. He had tried to forget the faces of those who had died by his hand.

War made all men equal.

It didn't matter who you were, or what you believed in. In the end, battle was survival. Nothing more, nothing less.

Trei smiled sadly.

It wasn't that way for him any longer. He would survive, no matter what they brought against him. He had moved beyond the concept of life and death, and into something new. He wasn't a soldier anymore, and nor was he a blacksmith's apprentice. He wasn't Fae, and never would be. Yet, he was the bride of Summer. He wasn't the heir to the throne, nor was he its appointed guardian. He was not the leader of an army, nor did he hold the respect of the council. These were his people, as were those that fell around him.

He crouched, ignoring the flail of attacks that did nothing but disintegrate against the eternal shell that protected his eternal soul. He took the hand of the woman gently, feeling her aura as it drained away, returning to the lifestream, as all things did.

Trei pulled gently, lifting her upright. She stared in confusion into his black eyes, as he lifted her up, and the battle raged on around them. No arrow nor blade struck against her, as he stood there, holding her hand. Trei smiled sadly, "Go home. Go back to your life, it doesn't have to end

here.”

---



## Claven

Claven screamed as the sword passed through her shoulder, as Luna shoved her to the side, freezing the knight solid and breaking them apart with a headbutt. Her mistress, yanked her to the side again, kicking someone in the gut, still moving, still fighting. It was all Claven could do to keep up. She wasn't cut out for this sort of thing. She was a farmer, not a warrior or a mage. She knew humans were supposed to be weak, but their weapons still hurt.

She pulled the sword out of her shoulder, quickly raising it to try and block. The sword was knocked out of her hands instantly, and the knight froze a hair's breadth from cutting her throat, twitching. Behind them Luna stood angrily, her hand sticking through their throat. She yanked her hand back, "Ward, Claven. Now."

She felt the doorway to her mind torn open, the entire world bursting into light again. She felt the dust vibrating in the air, the red dust curled up around her, begging to be set free. It was singing to her, an angry tune, the sound of a world betrayed. Claven sprinkled some dust into the air, forcing her thoughts to take shape.

Luna was suddenly driven backwards by a knight able to match her. A paladin.

Claven found herself alone.

The humans wasted no time, closing in around her, as she danced, listening to the dust, to the gift Luna had given her. This was magic. Not the hamfisted approach she was used to using to get things done. She was one with the lifestream, and it with her. Spells weren't predefined formulas that you could rely on. They were songs, joining you with the magic in unity.

So she sang.

She sang the song of the Fae, of the betrayed. She sang a song of hatred, or revulsion. She sang of Hero, and the mark he left upon her world. She guided the souls around her like a god above, across the void and beyond the shores to the worlds beyond. They were worlds apart, and the humans were beyond what she knew. She educated them. She may not be a strong Fae, but she was still Fae.

Claven tore the breastplate from a knight, impaling them on another going to their aid, before turning and ripping the skull from their shoulders. People don't die quickly. Death takes its time. You have time to watch it close in, to respond. A wound to the chest will slow you down and will kill you, but not right away. Humanity is bad at accepting inevitability. They continued to fight, even as she tore arms from sockets and broke bones with a flick of her finger.

The redhead sneered angrily. The invaders had no chance, they had to know it. The only ones who even stood a chance were the paladins. So why did they fight? Because it was all the mankind knew how to do. All that they were was a screaming toddler, breaking a toy rather than sharing it.

Claven rolled her eyes and turned, flicking her middle finger into a knight's head, crushing the helmet onto their skull.

Humans were such fragile things.

---

## Alphege

The spear moved around her in an endless blur, dancing as if it were unwielded, a mind all of its own. Arrows and swords meant nothing. Dislodged before the attackers could even approach her. Hands meant nothing. She detached them before the knight could even understand that they were under attack. Before the human could comprehend that this was not a war, nor even a battle. She was the Guardian of Alfheimr. A knight was a toy. A plaything to be discarded. She had grown beyond toys, she left those behind a long time ago.

She turned, looking in surprise at the crystal melting back into water and falling from the sky. A paladin. A holy knight capable of drawing upon the magic of a god. Humans felt there was a difference between the power of a god, and the power wielded by lesser races. There was some truth to it - magic was stolen from the gods. It had been developed, and understood, and grown separately.

The power of the gods had stagnated.

The elf's ears flared back to the side of her head as she launched forward, the ground exploding beneath her feet. The paladin's blade moved slowly, attempting to rise to block a frontal attack. She caught the sword in her teeth, her extended fangs wrapping around it and she snapped it, tossing it sideways. The paladin pulled away as the helmet was cut open by the force of the blow. She landed on a single toe, rotating briefly in the air, before the spear moved through the mortal as if they didn't exist. She shattered bone, tore flesh and snapped sinew.

The elf turned away as the remains of what might have been considered a living person fell to the ground as the rest of them spread out into the battlefield behind them.

---

## Vastras

“It really was a mistake, on your part.” Vastras yawned, looking at the fragile corpse lying on its knees in front of her. “You leaped into the first thing you could find a connection to. You didn’t check before you did. It’s my blood inside that thing. I restored it.”

She patted Trei’s old body on the head gently, and crouched in front of it, “I think, Summer, it is time for you to give up your connection to the lifestream, don’t you? You can’t stop me. Your realm is nothing but flames. By now, Trei is among the dead. Where he belongs. I sent a hundred paladins and ten thousands knights into your home. Give up on it.”

The corpse didn’t say anything. She probably couldn’t. The instincts of the ghouel were still in control, the queen had just hitched a ride and got stuck with a madman at the reins. Vastras smiled, “Well, if you won’t willingly give up, I guess I just need to make you, then.”

She wandered over to her workspace, hands drifting over the crystals she had kept there. Stored magic. Unaffected by the slowly destabilising environment. Weapons, tools, prepared for moments like these. She held up a small blue crystal, lifting it up to the light, “I just want the end of magic, Summer. I don’t understand why you keep trying to stand in the way. It isn’t like your life was that great to begin with. If I hadn’t created Trei, would you still cling on in this stubborn way?”

She put the crystal down and picked up another black one, holding it up, “Magic will be destroyed. The gods will destroy each other. Everyone gets what they want. The Fae will be cut off from everywhere else, finally getting their isolation. No more mortals in their way. The elves will be able to watch on for eternity. You should be thanking me. Janus is dead, and will never be a problem for you again. Yio and F’rir are dead and out of the way, never again to interfere in your life. Sarin will have her hands full containing the other celestials, too busy to concern herself with making your life difficult like she has for the last few hundred years.”

She turned, holding out the crystal, “This is a baby night terror. I’m afraid I’ve neglected it, so it is a bit... Ravenous. Shall we see what happens if I let it loose on your mind? Will you let go of life then? Return to the lifestream?”

---

## Astrian

She knew she was small, and that something bad was happening. It was frustrating. She could feel the swirl of thoughts of the people attacking, of the people fighting. She knew it should mean more to her, but she couldn't grasp the memories correctly. She knew she should be able to understand what was happening.

She'd been through something like this before, in one of her past lives. She knew that. She knew she'd lived before. Loved before. Been scared like this.

She wasn't alone.

The assassins, all of them with minds agog with thoughts of protecting Luna, stood over her, defending her. Dying for her.

The Faeling fell to her knees, clapping her hands over her ears. Death. Dying, dying, dying! Everyone was fighting and dying! She could hear them screaming, feel these souls slipping. She could feel them, all of them.

It wasn't fair! None of this was fair!

Astrian screwed up her face and let loose an angry howl.

The assassins around her flinched, falling to their knees, and Astrian stood up. She stepped forward, tiny hands clenched into fists, and she screamed again. The humans fell over. She raised her hands into the air, feeling their minds and grabbed them. Twisting them and binding them together, into a single dream.

A single nightmare.

The anger of the Faeling spilled out, corrupting their hearts, and giving rise to their fears. All of their fears.

Astrian growled quietly as the knights began to kill themselves.

---

## Azrael

Azrael fell backwards as his arm tore apart, bones and sinew snapping as what looked like a human in front of him pulled it away as if it had never been attached to him in the first place. The paladin winced, grabbing and cauterising the wound.

The eyes were wrong.

That was the only sign that this wasn't a human. The eyes were black voids from which no light escaped. No hint of colour nor soul. Whatever this thing was, it had humanity once, but no longer. Something else had crawled inside, corrupted the soul. This was an abomination, a weapon crafted by magic to pervert the glory of the gods. It was heresy. An affront to those he served. He may be injured, but all his strength and that granted to him by the goddess would be used to tear apart this creature. To erase it from history.

He drew the dagger from his side, charging the monster. The blade was a distraction, and the creature ate the bait, trying to disarm him as Azrael dropped the weapon, moving behind and kicked as solidly as he could.

Azrael crumpled.

The creature turned to him slowly, glaring down at him. "I'm a ghoul, idiot. Do you really think that you can ever be stronger than me? Physical limits mean nothing to me."

A ghoul. That's what it thought it was? It wasn't. Every ghoul had blazing eyes of fire, a sign of the soul being trapped in something it no longer belonged to. That wasn't the case here. The creature had infected the entire body, twisting and cavorting it until it had become something new. A physical manifestation of the will.

This creature wasn't dead. It wasn't alive. This was a soul too stubborn to die. An echo of something that should have died a long time ago.

Azrael slammed his palm into the chest, grabbing the creature's shirt, "Be free."

Before it could speak he headbutted, crushing his helmet onto his face. The creature was dazed, weakened.

The prayer came tumbling from Azrael's lips, as if he were still the young confused and angry man serving in that quiet temple, long before he knew the goddess had turned her eye to him.

"Goddess, enfold me.

Goddess, surround me.

Be in my speaking, and in my thinking.

Rain, hide the stars tonight. Autumn mist, obscure the hills from sight. Veil of cloud hide the skies above.

By the darkness of this soul, hide your face, goddess. Hide the shining of your radiance, there is love for you here.

Take my hand, goddess, take me where I cannot stand alone. Take this soul and cleanse the shadows.

By your brightness and your glory, expunge this soul, tonight!"

The creature in front of him yawned, "You done with the exorcism already?"

The knife hidden in Azrael's wrist slammed home, beneath the jaw and into the caverns of the skull. The paladin lowered the body slowly, quietly. "Claim this soul, goddess, and guide it home."

---

## Vastras

Vastras grabbed her face screaming as the spell rebounded, melting her face. She fell onto the ground, curling into a ball as she desperately tried to heal herself, trying to keep intact long enough to stay awake.

She felt a foot step on her ankle, snapping it.

The mage looked up in agony, and flinched at what saw. The ghoul was still there, but it wasn't. The skin and bone had broken away in parts, revealing a bright light beneath. She could see the shape and form there. She could one of those cruel blues eyes shining death and destruction down. See the madness there.

The Fae raised a hand, and Vastras stared in horror as the cave above vanished in a spray of dust and rock, revealing the outside sky. So much power. So much unrestrained power.

The half ghoul waved a hand and Vastras screamed as she felt her link to the crystals vanish as every single one of them shattered. The magic rebounded, turning stone to liquid and the air to poison.

Her city would be burning, collapsing. Dying.

The magic had been laced throughout, paved into the roads themselves. It would be a disaster up there. Everyone would be either dead, or unable to escape and soon to die. There was no other explanation. She'd sent the army away. There was no one to save them.

No one to save them from the wrath of this woman.

"It."

The first word she'd spoken since inhabiting the ghoul. Vastras looked in terror at the goddess inhabiting the dying flesh.

"Is."

The cave floor began to melt, and Vastras scrambled, hunting for magic, any magic, she could use to get out of this alive. She was burning, melting. She could already feel the bones in her legs beginning to dissolve. The walls were melting. The ground overhead was beginning to cave, dislodging broken stone from where the palace above had been.

"Finished."

Vastras couldn't scream. She couldn't breathe. Her nerves were dying. She felt the darkness closing in around her as the undead creature moved upwards, carrying the unending rage of the goddess.

She could guess.

Trei was dead, the link was broken. No thought would exist inside that mind except vengeance.

Vastras had set out to save her people from the gods.

She'd just handed the death of mankind up on a silver platter.

There was nothing she could do.

She was already dead.

---

## Alphege

The elf froze, mid-thrust of her spear.

Her heart broke. A tear ran down her cheek slowly as an arrow slammed into her chest, knocking her off her feet. She barely saw anything as the knights rushed to kill her.

She stood up slowly, knocking them back with waves of magic that tore the flesh from their bones, leaving them as little more than gristly puddles on the ground. She moved slowly, using the spear to steady her as she walked.

She was in shock, struggling more to breathe from the surprise than the arrow that had failed to pierce her ribcage.

She didn't understand how it was possible.

There was a fully-fledged army here, and nobody could be everywhere, but this was Trei. He was stronger than her. Faster than her. He could obliterate any opponent without trying.

Alphege felt her chest shake as she struggled to keep the flood of tears back as she walked through the red mist as her enemies dissolved around her. She was using too much magic, and knew she was going to burn out, but right now she didn't care.

All she cared about was getting to Trei.

She walked through the red mist, looking on as the paladin slowly lowered him to the ground, as if he were committing some mercy. As if he hadn't just killed someone who never asked for any of this. Who had never tried to cause harm to anyone.

"Algar ane anwrk!" Alphege growled angrily, the spear in her hand waking up. She stabbed it into the ground, and the ground rippled into life, knocking back the army, isolating the paladin in front of her.

She stepped towards him slowly, as he turned to her, preparing for battle.

He was fast. The blade cut a strand of her hair as she side-stepped the attack. She pirouetted on the soil, delivering a blow to his back that shattered the armour, but left the man intact.

He turned to her, tossing aside his dented helmet, and glaring. He was handsome, but scarred. He was covered in sweat and blood. Alphege stepped forward, ignoring his attempt to hit her and tore the padded sweatshirt off, tossing it aside. She flicked the centre of his chest.

The paladin fell backwards to the ground, groaning as he hit hard enough to shake the earth. He pushed himself upright, swinging a knife towards her. Alphege raised an eyebrow as the blade lodged in her shoulder, and grabbed his hand. She broke the bones beneath her fingers, forcing the knuckles through themselves.

"After stabbing me, what was the plan, mortal?" She asked, looking at him with disdain, "Did you expect to fight me as an equal? I may not be able to wipe out your army in a single blow. But I will wipe out your army."

The paladin tried to headbutt her.

She let him.

He fell to his knees, one arm dangling in the air. Alphege sneered and snapped her knee upwards.

The neck cracked sickeningly. She let go of the broken hand, letting the shell fall to the ground.



The mortal was dead. He had paid the price for killing the one she loved.

It wasn't satisfying. The fight had been a disappointment. How had Trei succumbed to this pathetic creature? Had he truly let his guard down so easily?

Trei was still gone.

Alphege wept, as around her the mortals died.

---

## Azrael

The light above him had faded and left him alone.

His body had fallen silently to the ground, defeated and broken. Nothing left but an empty shell.

The garden was aflame. He couldn't see the army anymore, couldn't see the fight. He was a shade, a flickering memory of something that was. He wasn't in the world anymore, though he hadn't left it yet. All that was left was an echo. A shadow in the flickering light as the garden around him burned and died. He found himself wondering if any of this had been worth it. If the destruction of the creature that Vastras had sent him out to destroy really had been worth doing so much damage to untold beauty.

The garden reminded him of an ancient tale, of the first people to have entered the world.

A place of beauty, where no evil or hatred could exist.

It was true, in a sense. He could feel the garden, even now, attempting to draw the angst and violence out of his heart. It forced him to look at the trees as the leaves turned brown and curled. Forced him to watch as the creatures of the garden flew from bush to bush, seeking desperately to escape the destruction of their home. The desecration.

"So, you can see it then."

He nodded quietly, not turning to face her. He didn't dare to, now knowing that this sacred place was falling by his hand. He had brought the horror of war to a place that had been opposed to the existence of such a thing. This was a place of healing, and here blood was spilled by his hand.

"You really are an idiot, Azrael."

He flinched at the words of the goddess, and knelt down slowly, passing a hand through the prickly and blackened grass, "It will heal. As all things do."

"Pathetic." The goddess retorted, "The only solace you can take is that this place might recover? Newsflash, it won't. The curator's hand is gone. She's dead, or will be. You killed her hope, Azrael. You took the only light of life left to the woman who forged this world in desperation, and you killed him. I did not send you out to be the tool of the bitch mage. I sent you to stop her, Azrael. Vastras seeks to kill me, and the others. Did you never see it? Did I allow you to be so naive as to believe that a mage of all people was seeking the end of magic?"

Azrael shook his head.

Death came with retrospective. He could see clearly how Vastras had manipulated him. It was as obvious as his death that the mage had been seeking to destroy his goddess. He hadn't seen it. Hadn't believed it. Had convinced himself he was serving the goddess as he waged war against a species that had done all they could to isolate themselves. They weren't invaders. They hadn't antagonised the human race.

The Fae were a myth to most simply because they refused to have anything to do with mortal kind.

They were victimised here.

He stood up slowly, "I have a question, still."

"Really? Do you deserve an answer?"

He shook his head, "I do not. Still, I want to know. Who was she?"

A hand touched his shoulder gently, “She was in love with the man you killed. She never stretched out a hand towards him, in respect of her goddess, F’rir. She simply did what had to be done. She was used by Vastras as well. Forced to create the situation that let Vastras create this very attack. Yet, she saw what was, and what could be, and stayed. She fought to protect the man she could not have, for a woman who hated her. She atoned.”

Azrael winced, “Mortality is anathema to Elfkind. How... How could she fall for him?”

“That’s... A long story.” Sarin laughed, her arm going around his shoulders and squeezing a reassurance, “Suffice it to say that prejudice and xenophobia are enemies that can be defeated by the heart. The heart doesn’t play fair. All is not fair in love, nor war. The heart lays everything bare. It takes the reasoning of the mind and throws it aside without caring. Only the strongest will can defeat the heart. The heart leads one to sacrifice oneself for a lost cause. The heart tells you to stand and fight, when the enemy is at the gate. You know you will die, but you might save someone else. If you can create hope, then the heart is what drives you forward.”

Azrael sighed heavily, “What now? I have barred the gates to the next life by my actions.”

“That isn’t your decision to make.” Sarin replied coolly, “We go to judgement now. The heart cannot stand in judgement over itself. Those you have known, they will be the ones to stand in judgement over you. You will not be a witness. They will be the ones who speak of your life, and the actions you took.”

Azrael sighed heavily, “I know few among the dead.”

“Time is over, little man.” Sarin replied, “All you have known will be there. They will speak of your heart, and lay bare the secrets it kept even from itself. Come, they’re waiting.”

He turned, and saw the air shimmering where he’d expected the goddess to be.

It was time.

Time to find out what he had been.

---

## Luna

Luna gasped, falling to her knees, swords falling from her hands.

She felt rather than saw members of her army stepping up to protect her, but she didn't care. Her hands grabbed blackened soil in angry fistfuls. Not anger. Not this time. Tears fell from her eyes unbidden as she lay there gasping.

Trei was dead.

She didn't think it had been possible. She didn't think she could lose him, even in all of this. Janus had failed to kill him. The fates had failed to kill him. Summer had always been there, always in the last moment, sweeping in with the power of the goddess to change the world, and save it. To save him. Not this time. The ball of emotions in her head was gone.

She could feel the severed thread of fate dancing quietly in the wind as she cried, leaning into the soil.

She could see his look of dumb confusion as she'd appeared in the bedroom at the beginning of all of this. Feel her cheeks flush as she his face and felt herself imprint onto him. Felt him become her world.

Her world was over now. Vastras had won. Her victory was complete.

Luna stood up slowly, hands relaxed as she looked at the field of battle, tears in her eyes. The Fae would win, eventually. Some had died, and some were dying, but in the end, the mortals never had a chance. All this could ever be was a madman getting in a few cuts of the knife before someone took his head. A madman's tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Luna raised a hand into the sky slowly, summoning her magic, her darkness. Her face was blank, and her heart was empty. She didn't feel anything at all, knowing what she was about to do, knowing what it would cost.

The world she wanted was gone.

She would usher in the new one with a sin to exceed the birth of the last.

The mortals began to panic, and the Fae slowed their attacks as the light of the sky vanished, blotted out by the rising storm of black dust overhead, as the princess stood there, weeping silently for what was lost. Her hair and dress shone in the darkness, the only light left in the coming darkness.

This was what she was born to do.

She was the Faen weapon of war. When nothing else could be done, when no one else was willing to act, it was her duty.

She was the Guardian of the Shrine.

She summoned the power entrusted to her.

Luna looked down sadly as she heard the screams begin. Heard the souls bound to her beginning to die. They were gone. The Fae were pulled apart, fragment by fragment and into the storm, into the stream of magic that was hers, preventing their return to the broken lifestream.

Justice had no voice in this world, and so it would remain silent. As silent as she, as she broke her vow as Guardian. As she broke every tenant of belief that all Fae held. As she became a shadow of a dying world. A world that no longer deserved to keep on living.

They'd all had the choices. They'd taken action, and doomed themselves. She was just doing what had to be done. What had to be done to end all of this, to stop the bloodshed, to stop the breaking of their hearts. To remind them of what they had done.

To remind the whole world.

This would be felt in every realm. Seen by every star. Every heart in every timeline would feel the cost.

Luna finally spoke, bitter words tumbling from her mouth.

"Hail, to the king."

---

## Alphege

The elf spun in horror as she saw the mortals disappearing around her. Fading to dust and ash. Souls called out, hands raised in terror, begging for mercy as the wind washed them away. She saw their auras turn dark, magic flowing through them like a poison. Eating away at what made them... Alive.

Alphege shivered as she felt a desperate hand crumble as it tried to grab her wrist, turning so she didn't have to watch those eyes as everything inside them died. As the sins of humanity were washed away. The elf felt tears streaming down her face as those who had been her enemy vanished as if they had never existed in the first place. She'd never felt for humanity.

She hated what they were, and what they represented. The sins of the original people, repeated time after time. The endless cycle of stupidity that was found in their short lives, their short civilisations. The empires rose and fell, committing the same atrocities, over and over again. No man was free of guilt, nor of sin. They were the corrupted people. They were everything that an elf was not.

She'd never felt for humanity, before this moment.

She saw the sins washed away, like so many of her ancestors had wished. Had even tried to do. To wipe the slate clean in a single brutal wave. To erase what humanity was. To take souls and turn them against each other. To burn them out, preventing their return into the cycle of life and death in the world.

Alphege fell to her knees, one hand over Trei's chest, as she watched the army around her dying. She could see through the cloud of dust, to the one who had summoned this heretical power. This horror from a time when even Elfkind had yet to attain civilised behaviour.

It was the power that all Guardians stood over.

The balance of life and death.

Alphege looked in pity at the white-haired Fae. Her aura was blank and empty. A shattered illusion, giving way to an empty soul.

Tiny claws dug into her arms, and Alphege looked down at the terrified Faeling. She hadn't the heart to push her away, nor the bravery to smile. The child could see what was happening as clearly as herself. Could feel what had been done.

Luna fell to the ground, holding a dying Fae, silently.

Alphege didn't approach. She didn't know what to say or do. Rendi had served his mistress faithfully. In return, she'd eaten his soul to commit an atrocity the likes of which had never taken place before. Nobody had ever managed to use this dark magic. Never had so many souls been wiped out. Never.

The elf breathed in carefully, steadying her breathing.

And it was all for nothing, in the end.

The Faeling looked up at her, cooing, and Alphege looked down at Trei's body. She hadn't just stood by his side and defended him for the purposeless aching in her heart. There was a chance, though a small one. It required the Fates be on her side, but she had a feeling that they would be.

"Astrian, step back, please." Alphege whispered, and the Faeling protested, grabbing her arm tighter. She smiled at the child, "It'll be okay. Well, it won't be as bad. You need to trust me. You

know you can trust me.”

The Faeling stepped half a foot backwards and crossed her arms, pouting.

Alphege placed both hands around Trei’s cold chin, and smiled sadly, tears falling from her eyes, “Rise.”

She leaned in, praying with all her might.

Her lips met his, and she felt a spark move between them.

Alphege gasped, holding her chest, and fell to the ground beside him, twitching and spasming. Her heart had stopped beating. Her lungs had stopped breathing. Her head was getting darker, quieter.

She prayed. The fates had to hear her. Had to listen.

She would pay the cost, any cost.

If this was her death, so be it!

Yet, if she were to die, then the Fates must keep their word. They must accept her offering. Trei had to live!

A rough hand grabbed hers as her eyes rolled back into her head, as Alphege felt blood beginning to froth out of her mouth. She could hear Luna dimly, complaining openly that Alphege had done exactly what Summer had done. That she’d gone and kissed him.

Interesting jealousy from a woman had managed to sleep with one of her true loves.

The Faeling was screaming angrily, and hissing. The raw emotion of a child. An unfair existence.

A hand slapped her face.

Alphege coughed violently, finding herself on hands and knees.

She looked up with an ashen face at the pink-haired woman standing over her. It wasn’t the goddess. It was another of the sisters.

“You really think you get to dictate terms to us, elf?”

Alphege clenched her fists, bowing her head, coughing blood on the ground, “Trei must live.”

“So you’ll give your immortal soul, for his. Is that it?” The fate demanded, kicking her in the chest. “Is your soul worth one tenth of the godmaker?”

The elf pushed herself back onto hands and knees painfully, “Trei must live.”

She felt a hand grasp her hair, yanking her neck backwards, forcing her to look into a pair of black eyes. Black and endless, like Trei’s. They lacked his compassion, lacked his understanding. Yet they were like his. “Trei. Must. Live.”

The fate sighed, wiping some blood off the elf’s chin, and then rubbing it between her fingers, “Is your soul really worth as much as his? You’re just an elf. He isn’t.” Alphege glared, “I was Guardian. I am not just an elf. I don’t offer just my soul.”

The fate paused, her face becoming gentler, “You offer your soul. You offer the power forbidden to all from the creation of this new world, when the peoples of this world sought to destroy the gods. You offer all of this, for him?”

“Trei must live.” Alphege cried, almost stamping her foot, “He has to. He has to.”

The fate sighed heavily, “I don’t even know if I have the power to bring him back, elf.”

She dropped her, pacing, “I would bring him back in a heartbeat, elf. I am Yio. I love Trei every much as you. I have had to watch him die, right here, right now, in every timeline. I can’t stop it. I’ve tried, time and time again, and I fail.”

“Together.” Alphege whispered timidly, holding out her hand, “Take me power. Take my life.”

Yio gestured to a scene nearby. Luna was shaking Alphege’s body angrily, standing over Trei, whilst the Faeling wrapped herself around him. “Life and death are unbalanced, or have you already forgotten? Somebody else beat you to the punchline. The sacrifice of one life may never again save another.”

Alphege shrugged, “I have. . . I have to try.”

“Why?” Yio asked quizzically, “Did Trei ever care about you?”

The elf shrugged pathetically. He probably hadn’t.

“From the shores, hidden by ancient mists.” Alphege said stubbornly, “Born aloft by an Elfin kiss. Clear the way, and lead you home, to eternal bliss.”

Yio grinned, “That’s the right answer, little guardian. Leave it to me.”

---



## Luna

Luna dropped Alphege, stepping back in shock.

Trei rubbed his eyes as he sat up, smiling in surprise at the Faeling in his arms, “Oh. Hey, Astrian.”

Luna fell to her knees, unable to speak. She looked sideways at the fallen elf, who had curled into a ball, but still seemed unconscious. She’d done something that Luna didn’t understand. Didn’t think was possible. Trei had died. His soul was gone. There was nothing left to resurrect.

Trei sighed heavily, looking around, “So. I guess we won, then.”

Luna shook her head, trying not to cry. She couldn’t say anything. Couldn’t tell him what she’d done. Done for nothing. Alphege had brought him back, with a kiss. Made all of her crimes matter. She couldn’t tell him what she’d done for him. She’d betrayed his memory in that moment. She couldn’t think of him accepting it.

The man sighed heavily, “Well, it’s over.”

“No.” Luna snapped, fighting tears again. And she swallowed, trying to force her emotions down long enough she could speak, “They attacked. They’ll attack again.”

The elf stretched, and Luna glared in jealousy at the perfectly toned stomach that showed for a moment, and then felt an arm wrap around her stomach. She glanced over her shoulder, seeing a tinge of red hair as the head buried itself in her shoulders, and felt her heart skip. She’d betrayed Claven too. Left her bound to an unforgivable monster. Death would be the kindest sentence that she should serve. She hadn’t thought about Claven, again. The woman really would be better off without her. They all would.

“Calis, then.” Trei sighed, “I have missed my home. I was hoping I wouldn’t be coming back like this.”

Alphege sat up slowly, holding her head painfully, “Are we ready for that? After everything we’ve been through?”

“Leave Vastras to me.” Luna said quietly. She could do what was best for everyone. Make the sacrifice again, but this time it would be her own life she’d take, and then the mage would be gone. Trei would be safe. Claven would be alone, but she’d never be forced to know just what depths Luna was willing to go to. Wouldn’t be forced to watch the woman she loved, again, make that scale of a mistake.

Trei laughed, “To you, Luna? She killed Summer. She’s mine.”

“I feel the need to point out a paladin just slew you.” Alphege spoke, the formal tones of her speech giving away the lie to Luna. The elf really did care for him. Cared enough to keep him at arm’s length. She’d been part of Summer’s murder. She wouldn’t let herself get close to Trei. She spared him. That’s what Luna should have done from the very beginning.

Trei flexed an arm, “And now I’m feeling as good as ever. I got this.”

All three glared at him. He sighed heavily, “I dropped my guard. It won’t happen again.”

Luna sighed, “Calis has to be destroyed. There’s no other answer. We never attacked them. She attacked us. We can’t leave anywhere for Vastras to hide. No magic for her to grasp. We have to be brutal.”

Trei shrugged, “We’ll see. Calis was always on the brink of war... The knights here, they

aren't from Calis. They're from Ozandia. I'm not saying we won't fight, but I don't think we'll find the city the way I left it. Something has happened there, too."

Luna stood up, shrugging, "We'll do what we have to. Get ready, I'm opening the gate."

---

## Claven

Claven was shocked.

The small group walked through the ruins of the city. If this could be called a city. She could guess where roads had once been because of cracks and chasms that formed. She could guess where houses had been from foundations. But there will little else left intact. Debris was piled everywhere. There was signs of fire and more earthquakes. Here and there she could see pieces of rubble that didn't belong to anything around them, they had to have been propelled to where they were from somewhere else.

She was struggling. Mortals didn't mean much to her. Trei had already been twisting on that belief, the belief that Fae were better. Luna saw him as an equal, and loved him every bit as much as she loved Claven. As much as Claven loved Luna. Here, in this broken city, she was being hit in the face with the belief. Forced to try and reconcile what she knew with what she could see.

Most were hiding the shadows, trying to avoid being seen. Weak and frail mortals in fear of their lives.

Now and then a mortal would fall to their knees, begging to be spared.

Is that how they saw the Fae? As walking weapons of destruction that wanted nothing more than to kill them? It hurt. That was exactly the way that Claven had viewed Hero, the mortal who had made it to the Faen realms. He'd walked across their worlds, killing and destroying everything in sight. He was an abomination. Yet... That was exactly how these people saw her.

It was enough to make her cry. She just wanted to protect them, these fragile creatures. She didn't want to bring war to them, not now. Even after everything that had been done. Summer's garden had been destroyed. Luna's heart had been broken. Yet... She couldn't blame them. It was the same with Trei. As jealous as she was, she didn't blame him for his connection with Luna. He wasn't in control of it, it was just something that happened. These people were innocent. They didn't deserve what had been done here.

A hand snagged her wrist, and Claven looked down in surprise. She saw the mortal's eyes widen in terror, and caught them as they went to run, "Wait. Please."

The mortal stood there, shaking, and Claven patted their arm gently, "Please. What happened here? I don't understand."

The human looked back at her, "Please. Don't be mad."

Claven smiled as gently as she could, "I'm not. Really. What happened? Why... Why is everything gone?"

"The Fae." The woman shook, "The Fae. A light like the sun. She took it all. Destroyed it."

Claven glanced over at the others, "A Fae did this? Luna. Could you do this?"

Her love shook her white head, "No. This was... An incredible force. I can feel the magic in the air. Something summoned enough power to destroy this city, but I've got no clue how they could do that. Summer, or Janus, maybe... But they're both dead."

Claven winced, turning back to the woman, "Thankyou."

She ran away as Claven released her, leaving her confused. "It's your eyes."

She glanced over at Trei, "What?"

“You have red eyes, Madam Claven.” He said slowly, “Humans don’t. Not normally. You look, well, like a demon.”

She tried not to feel offended at that. Being told she looked like a monster by her romantic competition was not the best thing in the world for keeping her temper in check. “What about you?”

“I don’t look human, not to them.” Trei replied, and sighed looking around, “We’re a few blocks from the centre. I can’t see the palace, so I’m guessing something happened there. Vastras would have kept the centre of her power close.”

Claven felt the pain in his voice. He was a monster too, then. None of this was fair. She didn’t like feeling pity for him. It was hard enough accepting that he was mortal and that Luna didn’t have a problem with that.

The few moved through the desolate city, as the people who had become refugees in their own home watched them cautiously.

---

## Summer

Summer had collapsed to the ground.

Her anger had burned out, leaving her as hollow as the shell that was failing to contain her soul. As flaky as the skin of this thing, slowly peeling away, letting her bleed out into the world, slowly fading. She would fade away. Cease to exist. She could feel it. She knew it. The lifestream was gone. It wasn't just weak anymore. Her connection to it had been severed. If she died, then she was dead. There was nothing to resurrect if she died here and now.

She was trapped. Not just tired and exhausted. When Trei had died... When he died she'd lashed out and destroyed Calis. She'd burned every brick, shattered every stone. She'd unleashed a catastrophe the human world had never seen onto the city. Thousands of mortals died screaming. And it wasn't enough. None of it was. They took him from her. They hadn't even cared when he died. He'd been dumped in the bloody Pit for crying out loud.

Trei had never meant anything to any of them.

But he had meant something to her.

He still meant everything to her.

Tears dripped silently down the mass of muscles that struggled to resemble a face, and more ash drifted away from it, joining the air. Without Trei, she didn't fear death. She welcomed it. She didn't care that Vastras had the last laugh. The witch had set a trap, and Summer had activated it. A self-defence spell, designed to go off in case the entire city was destroyed. A weapon designed to bleed the magic out of the attacker, forcing them onto the ground and then binding them in place. It was a pointless spell. A way to trap someone in time exact a vengeance, but nothing more.

It was exactly the kind of vindictive thing she should have expected the bitch mage who wanted to kill the gods to use.

She couldn't fight the spell. Any effort made it stronger.

Summer knew she was wasting time. She could give in. She could push all her magic into the spell, and die. Be free.

But she didn't want to be free.

She just wanted Trei back.

Summer just wanted to be alone with him in the garden. To be the two of them, and let the entire world fade away. She didn't want any of this. She didn't care. Why couldn't they leave her alone? Why did humanity have to be such a pox on creation?

Her face went white as she felt the world shift and looked up as the gateway opened, and the black-eyed figure stepped through.

The gateway shut behind him, and Summer flinched.

The Fae stretched his arms, and then his wings, as if testing himself out. As if he wasn't entirely comfortable in the body he was wearing. In a way, he wouldn't be. He'd been outside the flow of time. He could be billions of years old for all that she knew. He'd only ever observed. And now... Now he'd freed himself from his curse. Re-entered the world he had been denied.

He crouched in front of her, "Ooh. Youch. That's a spider trap and a half, isn't it?"

Summer glared at him, blood pouring from the broken shell covering her essence, pooling on the ground around her, "What do you want, Tyr?"

“Nothing.” The Fae shrugged, sitting down properly, “Seriously, Summer. I now want... Nothing. Nothing at all. It has been so long. I have been hunting and fighting for this one goal. I don’t know how long it has been. I did try, at first. To try and keep track of my own personal timeline. To count the hours of time I moved through. But after a certain amount of time... What does it matter if it has been a thousand years or five hundred thousand? I’ve been pushing and pulling every little figure in every timeline for so long, coercing all the pieces to get in line. It has been my life’s work, and now, finally, I’m done. I want nothing at all. I came to see you, Summer, because... You’re it. You are the only reason I’ve finally managed to escape my living hell.”

She struggled, trying to stand up, but collapsed, striking her chin on the rough pavement.

Tyr smiled at her tiredly, “Oh, Summer. You don’t realise it yet, do you? This was all about me. I do mean that. All of it. I made Vastras into what she is. How else do you think a stupid freaking mortal was able to stumble upon the path to eternity? They are clever, but not that clever. Not by half. It takes more than will and intelligence to become as powerful as that mage did. I taught her. That’s why she was so far beyond all the others of this world. I cheated. I taught her magic that wasn’t supposed to be discovered for a few thousand years. She was leaps and bounds ahead, a complete genius, because I made her that.”

Summer didn’t want to accept it. She’d watched him, talked with him. How long had Tyr been her enemy? Plotting her death? Did he plan to kill Trei, long before any of this began?

“Trei was my idea.” Tyr grinned, “He was made just for you, Summer. Vastras assumed he had something to fuck with all the gods, but it was about you. Because, to put it simply, you are the lifestream. The only way for me to re-enter this world, or any world, was to break my connection to the lifestream. I kept getting ripped out of existence by the damn thing. It would draw me, try and absorb me. And it would fail. It would spit me out, as some kind of corruption, but fail to break the connection. Then it would draw me in again. Time after time, beyond memory. The only way for me to live, was to destroy the lifestream.”

Summer didn’t respond. She was too weak to. She could feel it. With Tyr sitting there, she could feel it. The lifestream was still attached to him, but too weak to draw him in... Too weak... Because she was. It was her. Her own soul was all that was left of the source of all magic. The source of all Fae. When she died, so would they. Piece by piece. The only Fae who would survive is Tyr. Because he wasn’t Fae. Because he had been resurrected and became something self-sustaining. Something beyond mortality and immortality. Something beyond even the celestials. Tyr was breaking free of the cycle of life and death. All cycles. He was breaking free of time and space and matter.

“I just wanted to die, Summer.” Tyr sighed, “Was that too much to ask for? How long did you try to help me before you gave up? A few hundred years? I have spent millennia in this hell! You gave up in a shorter timeframe than it took for me to learn to interact with the world. Isn’t it fitting, your death will bring me life.”

---

## Luna

Luna wandered aimlessly, alone.

They'd split up to search the city, to try and understand what had happened. The group seemed less intimidating that way. Interviewing survivors was difficult when they assumed you were a military patrol sent by the destroyers of the city.

The princess paused, and raised a hand, tossing up a quick sigil into the air with her dust. She was right. She could feel magic. Faen magic, close, but weak. Incredibly weak. Could this be the Fae that had attacked Calis? Were they dying after burning out all their magic?

She moved towards it, pausing periodically to try and trace the essence again. It was rapidly fluctuating, coming and going. She could get a general direction, but not much more than that. She walked through the rubble, running over the uneven and broken bricks that had once been buildings that towered into the sky. She was moving towards the outskirts, where the damage was even worse than the centre, if that were possible. Here the ground itself seemed to have liquefied and turned solid again, burying entire sections of the city. Human hands and arms protruded above the solid rock as Luna ran passed them, feeling guilt.

They had died, and she hadn't been able to do anything. Whoever they were, to die this way was... Wrong.

She paused, her wings fluttering as she crested an apartment building just barely poking out of the soil, and looked down at the two figures she could see.

Her heart twisted as if she'd been stabbed.

One of the figures was Trei. It was broken, bleeding, and a light was pouring out of the myriad holes in the body. It had to be his original body, the one he'd left to F'rir when he escaped her and came back to them. This was the broken body of a ghoul, stolen and used by Vastras, no doubt.

Next to the body was another figure she recognised, and it terrified her. She didn't know how he could be here. It didn't make sense. He was meant to be stuck outside of time.

She dropped beside them, her wings rolling up behind her, "Tyr."

The black-eyed Fae waved a hand towards her, "Ah, Princess Luna. Right on time. So you see, Summer, I wasn't lying to you. I told you that you would see her before the end. Even if your end is imminent. Here is your little sister, all excited to try and save you, to try and cheer you up."

Luna fell next to Trei's body. She tried to put a hand over one of the light-bleeding holes, to try and seal it. She screamed, pulling her hand back in horror as it turned to ash. She looked at the figure trapped there. Looking into the eyes of the sister she already thought was dead, and was going to lose again.

"I wouldn't recommend trying that again, Princess." Tyr yawned, "That is the pure and unadulterated form of the lifestream itself. Touching it just going to kill you. Burn you up inside."

Luna looked over at him, "Help me."

"Help you?" Tyr screwed up his nose, "I did this to her, princess. I'm not about to undo the thing that is finally breaking the walls of me -"

He cut off as Luna's fist crashed into his face. She pinned him to the ground, both hands slamming repeatedly into that smug face of his. Over and over again. Her knuckles were bleeding, leaving a stain on him, but he wasn't reacting. As if she were doing nothing at all to him.

“Are you done?” He asked with irritation, and Luna flinched as she felt herself tossed backwards. She stood upright, tired. Tyr wiped his face, and she looked in surprise. He wasn’t injured. Not even a slight swelling or redness. No chance at bruising. She couldn’t hurt him. She was so much weaker than him that it wasn’t worth considering.

“Now, I made a promise to Vastras.” Tyr yawned, “And I am a man of my word. There only two people left connected to the lifestream, little princess. One of them is your weak-willed sister, already given up on living. The other is me. The one who has survived eternity and more through nothing but will. I think it’s time, don’t you?”

Luna looked at him cautiously, “Time for what?”

“Time for Summer to kill you.”

---



## Summer

Summer's eyes went wide as she felt herself detach from the ghoul again. The instincts took over. The rage, the hunger. The overwhelming desire to bite and break and thrash and tear.

Tyr snapped his fingers, and the binding holding her in place vanished.

Summer tried to fight, tried to scream. The anger bubbled up, covering up her vision, covering up her mind. She could feel the hunt.

The prey was near.

She moved towards it, tearing through the ground.

The prey ran, as prey always did.

She pounced from above, tearing off one arm and biting onto the wings that tried to flutter. She felt the teeth shatter in surprise. The wing wasn't delicate. She seized it with both hands as the prey began to rise into the air, and tore it free of the softer flesh on the back of the prey.

She revelled as the blood of the prey sprayed over her, the scent of its fear filling the air.

She tossed aside the inedible wing and ran after the prey again.

The prey turned to fight.

She twisted through the air with unusual grace as it turned to flames, passing by her. The heat ruptured blood vessel, char-grilled flesh. The pain was nothing but a distant memory. This body had no sense of preservation.

She ran through the flames and grabbed the hand that had summoned them, and her jaws crushed it. She howled in glee as she tore the hand free, leaving the prey defenceless.

The prey fell to their knees, blubbering words.

She didn't understand words. No need for words in the hunt.

Just the kill.

She killed.

---

## Claven

Red hair rose and red eyes flashed.

Pain that she didn't know how to express moved through her. The world around her vanished, plunging into darkness. Hatred overpowered her every sense. The Fae felt something tug at her sleeve nervously, and she lashed out.

She tore the head from the lesser creature tossing it aside.

She saw the panic as the others went to flee, and she flashed in front of them before they could finish breathing. Her hand protruded through the back of one creature, covered in a gristly sticky red mess. She turned on one foot, tossing the flesh fast enough to shatter one of the other creatures before it could leave.

Her fangs tore into the neck of a screaming, infuriating, little creature. She tore out the throat of the child, turning the whimpering into quiet bubbling noises as it fell to the ground.

---

## Ashwen

Ashwen stepped into the garden, looking at the destruction in surprise. She glanced over at her lieutenants who had gone ahead, and walked over, “What can you tell me?”

One of them shrugged, “Traces are inconclusive. Some sort of magic was used here. A large enough spell that it has blocked everything out.”

“What was the spell, then?” Ashwen growled angrily, and the group shifted nervously, looking at their feet.

Ashwen rolled her eyes and tossed some dust in the air, and frowned at the result. A forbidden spell. One trusted to Luna. She’d butchered her own people. It confirmed what she knew already. The hopeless cause that was following royalty.

“Survivors?”

“A Faeling,” Kru answered.

Ashwen turned and nodded, “Show me.”

The lieutenant pointed towards the house, “She’s in there. I wouldn’t go in. It’s Astrian. She’s killed three already.”

The brunette rolled her eyes, drawing her sword as she moved towards the log house. It hit her before she even opened the door. Memories of Janus lying dead on the ground. His brutalised corpse. It was Summer’s fault. She would avenge him.

She pushed open the door, smiling at the Faeling, “You won’t find a way to get me to kill myself that way, Faeling.”

The blonde-haired child looked at her angrily, tiny fists clenched.

Ashwen didn’t feel anything. No rage. No regret. She simple did what she had to do. What must be done if the Fae were to be free, free to grow. Free to become the people that they deserved to be. Free to be the people that the queen had prevented them from becoming.

It wasn’t murder.

It was an execution.

---

## Yio

Yio stepped down onto the grass slowly, shrugging uncomfortably in her dress. She figured turning up naked wasn't the most appropriate way to handle things this time around. She hadn't return to the garden to flirt with a man who would be a god. No, this time she came to stop a woman who believed she was one already.

A sword was drawn, pointing at her.

Yio looked down it to the angry Fae face behind it, and smiled gently, "You raise a hand against the Fates, little child? I'm not here to interfere in your pathetic little war. I'm here to stop an angry petulant woman from killing a child. A child who has guided your people out of the dark so many times. She is the greatest prophet that you have ever had. She foresaw this. You here and now, before any of it began."

The Fae sneered angrily, and Yio yawned, "Your funeral."

The sword thrust towards her, stopping instantly as she placed the top of a finger in the way. She blew a kiss towards the Fae.

They were tossed backwards and out of sight by the blow.

She turned and moved towards the house slowly. The others moved aside. They all assumed she was stronger and tougher than any of them. Which was true, but it didn't mean she was absolutely free to use that strength. She could only pay back in equal amounts what someone tried to do to her. She also couldn't use strength that was beyond what her attacker could cope with.

The treaty had a lot of conditions to it, even if it did let her intervene at times like this.

She paused as the door to the house opened, and the brunette emerged. The woman reacted immediately as she saw the pink hair that marked Yio out. She knocked aside the hand easily, and slapped the woman.

Lady Ashwen glared at her, holding her reddened cheek, "What do you want?"

"Astrian." Yio sighed, "Her death is wrong. Even you should be able to see that. Murdering a child. You have so much bigger concerns right now than lashing out at a child."

Ashwen rolled her eyes, "She's hardly defenceless."

"Was." Yio snarled, "You murdered a child. Justifying by the violence of your petty war. You have no idea what you are doing, little Fae. Janus was working for my sister. Did you know that? His cause, was our cause. F'r'r paid the price when a mortal murdered her."

Ashwen paused, uncertain, "Lies. It's always a lie with you, isn't it?"

In a way, it was. Yio never told the truth when a half-truth would do. It wasn't worth the hassle. Few creatures had the perspective required to understand the forces that she dealt with on a continual basis. Even just the barest basic, such as the illusion of time, was enough to drive lesser species like these out of their minds.

She reached for the door.

Yio grunted as the knife slammed between her ribs and into her lungs. An angry whisper entered her ear, "If you insult the Arbiter's memory again, I will go to war with the gods. Understood?"

The fate smiled weakly, and turned to Ashwen, "Damn you're an idiot. I did try and give you an out."

She fell backwards against the door, and slid to the ground, leaving a red stain behind her. Yio lay there, struggling to breathe. So it was this timeline then. She'd barely been resurrected and she was off to die again. She wondered if she'd be back. It depended which timeline this was. Whether this was the one where Trei had hope, and failed, or the other one.

She smiled as she drowned, looking up at the angry woman, "You're... Going... To... Regret... This... Forever."

Ashwen's boot slammed into her head.

---

## Summer

Summer cried.

It was over.

She'd beaten back the ghoul, again. Pushed down the instincts and the horrors of the mind of the beast. But she hadn't done it soon enough. She hadn't... She... Her thoughts spiralled off into an abyss, as she cradled the broken body of her sister, tears streaming down her face. His face. The ruined and mangled corpse of the man she loved. The man who had died.

Her sister had paid the price.

Her stupid, innocent sister. The woman who everyone thought was a weapon, but was still just a child to her. Summer could see the pain hidden behind Luna's attitude. Used to see. That was all over now. The flirtatious and explosive Fae was gone. Gone forever. Just like the lifestream. She'd never again see that face smile.

"Hold, mortal."

Summer started. She looked up at the elf that had entered the area, spear at the ready. She was signalling for someone behind her to hold back. It wasn't possible. It shouldn't be possible. "Trei?"

Summer growled angrily as she recognised the elf, "Stay back. Why are you here?"

Trei stepped in front, "Summer. It's okay. She's helping."

Summer winced. She'd killed her own sister. Who was she to judge? "It was Tyr. All of this. It was him."

Trei crouched by her, wrapping her broken hand in hers. "It'll be okay, Summer. We're here. I'm here. For you. Always."

Summer grabbed him, knocking them both to the ground as she buried her head in his chest, howling.

"All that is, may not have to be."

Summer glared up, "Haven't forgiven you yet, elf."

The creature smiled sadly, "Do you know the promise given to my people?"

Summer glared down at Trei, "Seriously? You kissed her?"

He rubbed his head, "Does it count at all that I was dead and not an active participant in any of this?"

"No." Summer replied, shaking her head. "You want to bring back Luna?"

The elf shrugged, "I may be able to, at a cost."

Trei glanced up, "What cost did you pay to bring me back?"

"Yio paid."

Summer snuggled into Trei, glaring up at the elf, "No. The lifestream is gone. If you try and resurrect Luna, we're just going to end up with another Tyr. A Fae separated from reality. I can't see her not becoming the monster she thinks she is, if that were to happen."

The elf knelt by the body, stroking the white hair gently, arranging her hair. "She did not deserve this fate, even if she did welcome it."

“What?”

Trei grabbed Summer’s hand, “Luna used a forbidden spell. I think.”

Summer blanched, “Oh.”

The elf sighed heavily, “She saw Trei fall. She did not know that his death need not be permanent.”

Summer glanced at the ruins surrounding her. She may as well have cast a forbidden spell herself. She’d probably ruined any chance for peace between human and Fae for hundreds of years. The people would remember her rage, they would not know her pain.

“Stop!”

The elf paused, sitting back on her knees, looking at the newcomer in surprise.

Summer wrapped herself tighter around Trei, “Oh screw you, Sarin.”

The pink-haired woman rolled her eyes, “I do not desire to be entangled with the mortal freak, Summer. Show some respect.”

“He’s infectious.” Summer growled petulantly.

Sarin sighed, “Perhaps. The resurrection of Luna must not occur, not yet. Is that understood, Alphege Algar? The path is set, the course must be followed.”

Summer raised an eyebrow, “Well. That’s a little more forward than normal.”

The fate flicked her hair in irritation, “Tch. Here’s something else forward, prepare for battle, queen of the Fae. War is upon you.”

---

## Ashwen

She held up a fist, signalling the unit to stop moving, and floated upwards, moving forward slowly. She'd been able to trace the survivors of the garden to this location. To the mortal world. To the ruins of a city that had quite obviously been attacked by Summer. There was no one else who could destroy an entire city. Wipe out an entire kingdom. No one else had that kind of power.

No one else was stupid enough to unleash that kind of hell.

The Fae winced at the smell as she approached the square ahead, hidden by debris. It was the smell of death. Of copper and the beginnings of putrefaction. She could hear the flies already. She paused at the edge of the debris, looking down at a small dirty trail of blood pouring into a nearby drain. It was only a trickle, but showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Ashwen hardened her stomach and drifted into the square.

The smell hit her like a sledgehammer between the eyes, and she vomited immediately. She didn't have a choice or chance to hesitate, her stomach just hit the eject button.

The walls were painted with intestines, bone fragments were scattered over the ground which was soaked in blood, pooling here and there. She could see shattered skulls here and there. There was no way to make a body count. There was nothing intact enough to be called a body. People had died here, mortals.

Near one of the ruined walls she saw what she'd heard earlier. The gentle thump was caused by someone sitting with their arms around their knees, rocking and hitting their head against the wall. They were coated, head to toe. She couldn't make out what colour their hair had been, not with the flesh and blood tangled throughout it. There was no weapon in sight. If this person was responsible, she couldn't see how.

Ashwen drew her sword, the scabbard chafing and echoing. The figure didn't react, as if they couldn't hear her. This death would be a mercy. Whatever this creature had witnessed was beyond what a mortal could cope with.

She drifted over, holding her breath, and went to stab downwards at the base of the spine.

Ashwen breathed involuntarily, gagging, and dropped onto the bloody ground with a soft splash.

This wasn't a mortal.

On the back were two blood-drenched wings, curled and flattened by the gristly material soaking them. But all the same, wings.

This was a Fae.

"Who are you?"

The girl stopped banging her head, turning slowly, and looking up, "I didn't mean to... I didn't... I... I... I killed... I didn't mean it!"

Ashwen crouched slowly, sheathing her sword, "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

"It's not okay!" The Fae cried, "I killed them! They just wanted to be safe!"

She had no idea why the Fae would be trying to help mortals. If it was mortals. "Who did you kill?"

"Them." The Fae bawled, punching a hand into a bloody puddle, "They just wanted to be safe. We took their homes... They just wanted to be safe."



So, mortals, then. Ashwen couldn't bring herself to feel for any mortal stupid enough to get in a Fae's way. They weren't Fae. They were just halfmad creatures without strength or intelligence. However, it had moved this Fae. Moved her into madness.

No.

Something had driven her mad. This was just a result.

"What happened?"

The terrified Fae froze, looking at her quietly, as if seeing her for the first time. "Lady Ashwen?"

She frowned, "Do I know you?"

"No one does." The Fae said sadly, looking down, "No one knew who I was. No one paid attention. Not until her. She showed me magic. The rest of you ignored me... But she gave it to me."

Ashwen hedged her bets, "Summer?"

"Luna."

Those two syllables tumbled into the air with a reverence and emotion that Ashwen hadn't heard in a very long time. The pain that was mixed in told her everything she needed to know. Everything that there was to know.

"Luna died." Ashwen winced, "She was a great woman."

Angry blood-stained hands seized her head, and fangs flashed in front of her face, "She was mine!"

She was towing a line here. It would be safer to kill this Fae, and move on. Every reward had risk. A Fae this angry, this hurt, could be a powerful weapon. A weapon she could use to gain the upper hand on a Fae who had just levelled an entire city.

"Summer should have protected her." Ashwen growled, "Where was she when her sister died?"

---

## Alphege

The elf spun the spear, blocking the attack on Trei. She was uncertain in this conflict. Her opponent wasn't in control of herself. Clearly Tyr had pushed her aside and allowed the ghoul to act. To commit atrocity. However, the woman had already killed Luna, a powerful warrior in her own right. If she held back it was possible that both her and Trei would die.

The spear continued to move in her hand fluidly, blocking every mad strike of the creature whilst the ground beneath her collapsed like a child's sand castle. The rage controlling the ghoul was unceasing, unending. The only advantage she had was that the woman was dying. Yet, the monster that she had become didn't have a sense of self-preservation. It hadn't slowed, despite the muscles tearing and tendons snapping. It continued to move in a haphazard and unpredictable way. Violence the only thing on the creature's mind.

Mind. The mind wasn't exposed, she needed to find a way to bring it to the forefront.

"Shit." Trei cursed behind her, and Alphege risked a glance. She swore as she turned back, blocking Summer again, "For fuck's sake!"

She felt a ripple shift in Trei's aura as he was surprised by her unusually uncouth language. The situation called for it. "Can you handle them?"

Them. An veritable army was spilling into the square, lead by two Fae. One was a brunette that Alphege didn't recognise at all, and apparently the one in command of everything. Beside her however, was the problem. It was Madam Claven. Covered head to toe in what stank of human blood. Clearly the woman was not coping with the death of Luna. Much like Luna had not dealt with the death of Trei well. As violent as each other. They made a pair.

"Summer!" The newcomer yelled angrily, "Surrender!"

Alphege ducked backwards as a fist broke against the side of her spear. Surrender? Seriously? These people were insane. They'd be lucky if they came out of this alive.

Trei growled angrily, "They're going to attack."

"Handle them, idiot!" Alphege roared backwards, knocking Summer to the side with a crushing blow to the ribcage.

---

## Trei

Trei sighed heavily as the Fae charged towards him. The space was small, so there was only three or four at a time that could enter. That was the only good news. They carried weapons, he didn't. They had the strength of the Fae, which was enough to equal his. On top of which he had to keep an eye on Alphege and Summer. He wanted them both to survive, to get through this.

He had no idea where Tyr had vanished to. He'd made Summer kill Luna and then just seemed to lose interest and wandered away, leaving Summer in a blind rage. He knew the kind of anger she was facing. He'd buried, controlled it, long enough. Maybe that was why being a ghoul had come so easily to him in those first few days. Why he'd managed to take control of his body so easily when it seemed that others just turned into homicidal maniacs. Trei hadn't lived through the war when he was young. His wrath had. He was a monster, down to his very core. He'd kept it contained for so long, and now Summer was being forced to experience it.

It wasn't fair.

A fireball breezed through the air towards Trei, blackening the ground and burning out the air. He punched it backwards at the caster with unforgiving strength. He'd died that way. Not this time. He wasn't the weak willed little human trying to impress a girl that he had been then. He'd been through so much since then. Become so much. He wasn't willing to lose Summer, not again. If they wanted her, they would go through him.

He grabbed the wrist of the Fae before they could cast again and slammed his forehead into theirs with a sickening crack. The Fae slumped unconscious to the ground and Trei turned in time to grab the sword heading for his heart. He used it to pull the Fae towards him, grabbing their wrist and breaking it. He kicked them backwards and turned to the next opponent.

A blur of red shot passed him, screaming. Trei kicked the Fae fighting him in the gut, trying to turn and race after her. To stop Claven from becoming whatever she had.

It was too late.

Alphege screamed, before the sound being cut off.

Trei sprinted, the ground beneath him exploding to dust as he hit it. He froze as he saw the red-haired Fae standing, hands around the elf's shoulders. She was eating her throat, tearing at the flesh and slurping.

He felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

"Claven."

The Fae turned, looking at him with an arrogant expression, "Oh it's the dead bitch. Are you upset? Don't you feel it at all? Luna's dead, asswipe. You don't care do you?"

"I care!" Trei yelled angrily, "Alphege had nothing to do with it. You killed her. As if it... Does it mean anything to you? Are you anything better than me?"

"I am better than you." The Fae spat blood into the air, "I am Fae, and you are not! You are nothing but a shadow! You're the reason everyone is dying! You are the epitome of evil in this world, stupid mortal. Alphege is dead, because she cared about you. Luna is dead, because she cared about you. Astrian is dead, because she cared about you. And now, I'm going to kill Summer."

The ghoul was distant, grabbing it's head and shaking. Seeing Alphege murdered seemed to have given Summer a hand up. Not full control, not yet. But something.

Claven turned to fly towards the weakened creature.

She jerked to a stop in the air, turning to see the hand gripping her wrist in surprise. Trei glared at her, "I won't let you do this, Claven."

An angry hand slashed across his face. Trei didn't flinch as the skin peeled and his eye was blinded. Pain was an old friend. There was no pain that could compare to having your soul stripped into pieces and reconstructed again. He broke the wrist in his hand.

Claven screamed, but her knee flew towards his chest. Trei deflected it with his elbow before moving behind the Fae and slamming his fist into her spine. It broke with an audible snap.

The wings beat, turning as Claven continued to try and fight.

Trei grabbed her head between his hands, "I really am sorry, Claven. But no one is hurting Summer."

---

## Ashwen

Ashwen pointed her sword at the ghoulish creature that seemed to coming apart in front of her eyes, ignoring the hellish sounds of bones breaking behind her. “The sentence for your crimes, is death.”

She slashed towards the weak creature, as she had towards the Faeling. As she would to any who stood in her way. Any who corrupted the memory of the Arbiter.

The sword flew apart, floating fragments in the air. Ashwen went white in horror, remembering the moment her father had died. The creature in front of her stood slowly, and Ashwen swallowed as she saw one of Summer’s eyes peeking out where the skull had begun to come apart. Brilliant red hair floated in the air behind her. The eye was unforgiving, but not without understanding. There was a terrifying intelligence there. Intelligence without mercy.

“Lady Ashwen.” The creature growled angrily, “You have committed treason against your queen. You have lead the council to war on behalf of a traitor! Janus betrayed you, as much as he betrayed me. You were nothing to him! Nothing! If he had ever cared for you, then you would not have found his dead body. You would have died with him when Vastras attacked. Janus was sleeping with F’rir. He was a slave of the fates. He was a manipulative bastard who betrayed us all by turning Fae against Fae. By raising armies and assassins in secret. This is not the memory of someone who deserves your heart.”

Ashwen tried to punch. She felt her knuckles give way as it struck a solid barrier in the air.

A single finger reached forward, tipping up her head, and Ashwen instantly felt powerless. All her magic was gone. Completely gone. As if she’d been cut off from the lifestream itself.

“Enough people have died today. Enough people have paid the price for Tyr and his vendetta.” Summer shook her head, bristling with rage, “I banish you. All of you.”

Ashwen didn’t have time to scream as the universe poured through her head. She fell onto her knees, vomiting violently. She fell to her side, weak and exhausted, her head pounding violently. She struggled, trying to remain awake. Trying to understand what had just happened.

She was lying on yellowing grass.

She could see mountains, and stars in the sky.

Nothing she knew, though. Nothing she could recognise.

She didn’t have the strength to sit up. All she could do was lie there in the grass. She could hear the others going through similar experiences, similar bewilderment. Summer had banished them. She’d grabbed the entire army and thrown it into another realm as if they never represented a significant threat to her. Maybe they hadn’t. Maybe Ashwen had been fooling herself to think that she could kill Summer.

Her magic was still gone. Without it... Was she mortal now? Could she return to the lifestream if she died? Or was this one last lifetime to live?

---

## Trei

Trei grabbed Summer's shoulders as she slumped. He held her tight, begging her to stay alive silently. He didn't dare to speak, he was barely holding back the flood of tears. He'd heard what the Fae had said.

Astrian was dead as well.

There was only Summer left, now.

"Touching."

Trei glared up at the black-eyed Fae as he entered the empty arena, "It seems that Summer has done as instructed, and given up the lifestream for you, boy. She has used the last of her power, the last of the lifestream. She's nothing now. An echo that will soon fade and be forgotten. Let her go, Trei. You will find yourself a lot happier if you forget her. Her death had to be."

"Back off."

Tyr rolled his eyes, "Really? That's the best you have for me? I need Summer to die, so I can be free. It is going to happen. You don't get a say in the matter. You are nothing. Truly and utterly, nothing. I, however, have a reason to fight. I want to be free. Do you know who did this to me, Trei? Who tried to resurrect me and got me trapped between the living and the dead for millennia?"

Trei knew the answer. It was obvious enough.

Tyr paced back and forth, "Yes. Summer. That bitch trapped me for eternity. True, she did try and help for a time. By which I mean she cared for about three of her lifetimes. But she stopped trying. Stopped caring. She moved on, whilst I endured torture for eternity. If her dying frees me, there is no guilt to be had. So, as a bystander I don't care if you die or not, but you will not stand in my way."

Summer reached up a frail hand to Trei, stroking his cheek, "Run."

"What?"

She pushed herself upright shakily, "I said run, idiot."

Tyr waved a hand, "Better do what she says, boy."

Trei clenched his fists, "I've already told you, Summer. I'm never leaving you."

The air snapped, and Trei raised his hands, barely keeping upright as the gust of wind hit him like a brick wall, followed by an almighty boom that had his ears ringing. He winced, holding one of his ears as he looked in front of him.

Tyr was standing there tiredly, holding Summer by the throat, her neck broken in his hand. The remnants of the ghoul were turning to ash and floating up into the air, whilst the light that showed who she was... It was fading away.

He'd done it.

Tyr had killed her, before either of them could react.

Trei screamed and ran forward, punching and kicking. He grabbed debris and hurled it.

Not a single hit struck home. Tyr didn't block any of the attacks, he simply was in a different place by the time they landed.

---

## Tyr

“Enough!” Tyr yelled, knocking the ghoul backwards. He glared, “That’s enough, Trei. Don’t you understand it yet? What we are?”

The man glared at him, hate bubbling there, “We?”

“You are nothing like a ghoul.” Tyr growled, “And neither am I. There is no one else like either of us, in any realm. We are not alive. We are not dead. We are unbound by the cycle of life and death that effects all things. We are cursed. I didn’t just free me, Trei. I freed both of us. The victims of Summer’s eternal necromancy. Forced to be different from all things. You couldn’t die even if you wanted to. That’s why the fates kidnapped you, rather than wiping you out. The universe wouldn’t let you die, Trei. Not ever.”

The man didn’t answer, looking angrier than ever.

“I didn’t dodge your attacks, Trei.” Tyr sneered, “The universe realised it would hurt me and it changed the world so I wasn’t in the way anymore. You can’t kill me. I can’t kill me. That’s why this all had to happen. I became a fixed point in time and space and matter. That isn’t supposed to happen. Not ever. I am a fact in a universe of relativities and perspectives. The only way out was to destroy the only thing that keeps life going.”

Trei glared at him, “You killed her. That’s all I care about. I don’t give a shit why you did it.”

“You will.” Tyr sneered, “Because I’m free now, and you’re not. You’ll care in a hundred billion years from now, when the entire universe is dead, except for you. You’ll care when time stops moving. When matter degrades and falls apart. Because you will still exist, even when the universe stops. I have witnessed every event of every timeline of every possibility. I was forced to live them all at the moment of my resurrection. I have seen the universe burn out. This one dead Fae is nothing compare to what I have seen. She is nothing in the history of the universe. Come and gone in the blink of an eye. You don’t have numbers large enough to represent how long I have been forced to stay alive, Trei.”

He paced backwards and forwards, “I want you to understand, Trei. The only way you will get to be free, is if you let go of her memory. An eternity of hatred against something you can’t change isn’t worth it. Don’t let your anger burn you out. I have done only as much as needed to be done. Nothing more.”

---

## Trei

Tyr left. His words still ringing in Trei's ears.

Trei didn't care.

He fell to his knees. He didn't even have a body to weep over. Summer was dead. She was gone.

He'd never hear her laugh that sounded like wind chimes in the wind.

He'd never see her smile again.

Never see her screw up her nose and call him odd again.

He'd never see her in the wedding dress, as the two walked down the aisle.

It was over.

There was no coming back from it this time. There was no resurrecting with the power of the fates. No reincarnation from the lifestream.

Trei cried, as he remembered her.

He'd stared in surprise as the double vision faded. The voice had been of a woman, not one he'd met. She was a redhead, a complete rarity in the city. She was sitting on a wall nearby, cross-legged, sipping tea from a gold-edged cup.

His jaw dropped as a flash of movement caught his eye. On her back, were two nearly-transparent purple wings. They were about half her height, but spread out would be much wider than she was tall.

He'd been so surprised that she'd existed. That the Fae existed.

"Sure? ... You aren't grossed out by eating dead things?"

"Its just meat, right? Humans eat meat."

"Ew." Summer had shivered, "Do humans eat normal things too?"

"What do you mean by normal?"

"Um..." Summer thought for a moment, "Leaves. Grass. Nectar, flowers."

Trei smiled sadly at the memory. She'd said that so matter-of-factly. As if it were entirely normal to shove a flower in your mouth and swallow it. She'd been horrified that he ate meat. As if the thought was reviling down to the concept... Yet all the same, Summer had taken him hunting. She'd helped him, even if it disturbed her. Even though she didn't know who he was, she'd opened her home and heart to him without a hesitation.

The Fae had been right.

Everyone who cared about him died.

Astrian standing by the fire. The woman had turned around, and he immediately felt the need to straighten up. The woman bowed her head slightly, "Sir. I am known as Astrian. I am the caretaker of this location. The Lady Summer has been called to deal with a situation. I shall be assisting you today."

Trei sighed heavily, remembering the butler. Upright and correct. Yet, whenever she thought he wasn't paying attention she would hum to herself quietly, an ancient tune. The kind of music that crept into your head and curled up around your mind and stayed there for days.



Astrian had died bringing him back. Forced to endure childhood again.

Becoming a tiny Faeling not understanding what was going around her. Not understanding why she wanted to possess Trei, and not understanding why he wouldn't let her.

He could remember Luna.

She'd bristled with anger, and he'd felt himself struggling to contain his laughter. She certainly looked cute when she got riled up. Then a thought occurred to him and he immediately flatlined. If Summer found out he was flirting with another Fae she might kill him, or worse. Or the Council might use it as an excuse to hurt Summer.

"I am the Lady Luna." She growled between clenched teeth that Trei suddenly realised were all fangs, "I am the Crown Princess, the Shadow Knight of the Evening Realms, and Guardian of the Shrine."

He hadn't understood a single one of her titles. He still didn't fully comprehend it.

She was always quick to anger, and found Trei so easy to make her explode, and all the while all he could think when she yelled at him was how cute she'd looked. That thought hadn't changed much when she'd found Claven. The two had made an adorable couple, feeding each other leaves whilst he'd battled Alphege.

Now there was a relationship that had changed.

All he'd wanted to do when he met her was murder her, tear her limb from limb.

Yet, Alphege had given her last trying to protect Summer.

She'd given her life for her, and he hadn't been there to save her. She'd managed to find a way to save him back then... But he hadn't managed to save her.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" He'd told her. Pretending to be completely calm after catching the elf unaware.

"What do you feel, mortal?"

"Mortality. I feel mortal. Even though I'm not. I feel like things will come to an end. That all of this is about to make sense, and that will be over... But nothing ever truly ends. All actions beget the next. The sun doesn't stop shining just because you wish it would. Even if we win in the end, tomorrow will still come creeping in."

Alphege had stepped towards him, "You feel clarity. You begin to see how events fit together."

He wished he had her stability now, more than ever. Her way of being able to look at the world with brutal purpose, unshaken.

"And what am I? Am I a mortal, elf?" He'd demanded her to tell him, still hurting from when he thought Summer had died. Thought Alphege had helped kill Summer.

"If that is your desire, it shall be yours. If the end of your life is what you seek, you will find it."

He still had no idea what she meant.

He'd wanted Summer, and he'd found her... And she'd been erased.

"Trei'el?"

He looked up with exhaustion to the edge of the square, where half a dozen humans were standing. Terrified refugees, not knowing why the world had been torn down around their ears.

Why their entire city had been consigned to oblivion. Their lives stripped away because an old man wanted to die.

No one called him by his full name. He hadn't told it to anyone since before the war.

One of the refugees stepped forward, an old woman. Badly burned and scarred, leaning on the solid frame of a blacksmith. His blacksmith.

"Master?" Trei asked slowly, standing up weakly, "You survived, then."

The man just grunted. He'd never been one for words.

The blacksmith nodded to the woman with him, who'd spoken, and Trei looked at her carefully. He couldn't remember her. Not from anywhere, yet she knew his name. His real name.

The woman paused, looking up at him with those tired eyes, and the broken body of someone who has known a terrible life. "Don't you remember me? Trei'el?"

He frowned, "I'm sorry. I don't."

The blacksmith's hand caught him over the back of his head, "She's Valis, boy."

Trei looked at her in shock. The scars had distorted the shape of her face. The woman he'd known hadn't had a mark on her, preserved by the overbearing alchemist who used her in his experiments.

"Mother."

She smiled at him tiredly, touching his cheek weakly, "So, you survived, then."

Trei sighed heavily, "No, I didn't. I'm not alive anymore, mother. I'm not dead either. I'm... Something else."

The blacksmith raised an eyebrow, "You're talkin' and walkin'. That's livin' to me."

His mother held his hand gently, "Were these your friends?"

He winced, "Yes."

"The bright one. Who was she?"

His tongue caught in his throat, and the blacksmith sighed, "Aye. It do be like that."

Trei felt the tears coming, trying to fight the inevitability. "They're all dead. All of them."

His mother patted his hand, "It hurts. I know."

---

## Sarin

Sarin stepped onto the broken ground.

She couldn't believe she had to do this. It was ridiculous. He was already giving up, forcing her to intervene. She thought he was better than that. After all the crap he'd been through she would have thought that he would realise that nothing was permanent, and that you could always change how things had turned out.

"Mortal."

Trei looked up at her slowly in surprise, "Pink... You're a Fate. F'rir?"

"Oh, she's still dead." Sarin replied, "I haven't got around to resurrecting her. I did wake up Yio, though."

On cue her sister appeared, arms wrapped around his middle, and he went bright red as she whispered something in his ear. Sarin's eye twitched, "Yio. He's not yours. We've discussed this. Back off."

The fate stuck out her tongue, and then said something else to Trei. He swallowed nervously and then looked at her, "Why are you here? It's all over. Tyr won."

"He won because you're an idiot!" Sarin yelled, causing her sister to vanish and reappear behind her meekly. "For goodness sakes! Tyr won because you let him. Have you not figured it out yet, mortal? Are you still thinking of yourself as a freaking mortal?"

He glared at her, "Figure what out? Why will no one just tell me?"

"We have. Repeatedly." Sarin growled, "You. Are. A. Fate. Just like me. Just like Yio."

Trei sneered, "And you've lied to me before."

Sarin smiled slowly, "Small lies, maybe. Misleading truths, certainly. Part being a Fate, Trei, is self actualisation. What you believe about yourself becomes the truth. That's how you took the dead body of a Fae, and now you look human. Because you believe that's how you look. So no, just telling you isn't helpful. Because you believe certain things, they happen. That is dangerous in the hands of someone who has not been through hell. Has not been forced to understand what they believe."

Trei seemed to be processing things, "Wait... Mother?"

The burned woman next to him looked at him in surprise, "Yes?"

"When did you die?"

"Idiot!" Sarin shouted, "You believe she died now. You now believe you resurrected her. So time has been rewritten to accommodate you."

Trei sighed and looked over at her, "Then why did Tyr beat me? I hate him. I tried to kill him."

"Not hard enough." Sarin turned her nose up, "You pitied him, Trei. You let him off easy."

The fate sighed, "I've done what I came to do. Yio, this is your last chance."

Her sister went bright red for a moment, as if she were struggling to decide what to do. As if she hadn't already turned up naked to talk to the man once before. There was a flurry of air as she made up her mind and yanked up her skirt.

Sarin rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers, taking both back home. “Really? Was that so fantastic?”

Yio stuck out her tongue, “You don’t get it, Sarin. You’ve never felt for anyone. It didn’t mean anything before I realised I didn’t just want a fling. Being sexy is easy when you think you can sleep with them and move on.”

She rolled her eyes and settled into her chair, “Do me a favour, don’t get killed again any time soon. It’s a pain to bring you back.”

---

## Trei

He knew what he had to do now. Or pieces of it.

Sarin had given him everything he needed to know. Everything he needed to make sense of who he was, where he was, and what he could do. What it would take to solve this. He could solve this.

Trei sighed heavily, closing his eyes and letting go of the world around him. This was something that Astrian had attempted to teach him. A moment of clarity, of freedom and peace. He had to let go.

He let go of his mother, and his teacher.

He let go of his anger towards Vastras. The woman who had forged him as a weapon of war to complete the cycle of sin against the gods. He forgave her, pushing aside what he felt as irrelevant. It no longer mattered. None of that mattered anymore.

He let go of his grief for Summer. She had lived, he had loved, and she had died. There was nothing left anymore. The story was complete. He would remember her, but he couldn't afford to hold onto his past anymore. For the future to live, the past must lie. He let go of her smile. Of her hope.

Trei felt as if he were drifting, separated from reality. He was in nothing, and of nothing. He was fading to nothing, becoming one with the void.

He let go of Luna. Of the angry and adorable Fae who used to yell in frustration every time she had to speak to him. Of the dark warrior willing to do whatever it took. He let go of her small face framed by white hair. He let go of the memory, of watching her die. Watching her in her sister's arms, battered and broken, but without hate. She had found her peace before the end, after a life without it.

He let go of Astrian. Of the beautiful and intelligent woman, of the angry child. This was someone who had deserved their peace, but never found it. Her life ended in the same violence that had taken a charming equal and forced them into the body of a child. He could not afford to regret her life. He let her go, let go of the feeling that he needed to fix it, to make up for what had been done. He let go of his guilt.

"Really? You think it's just that easy?"

A voice jerked Trei upright, and he frowned. This was not the void, but it was a void. An endless white and formless world. Standing in front of him hands on her hips, was a pink-haired devil.

He sighed tiredly, "Yio. Did you realise you were next in line?"

"I'm not alone here, Trei." The fate scoffed, "We're all here. So you can tell us. So you can give up on all of us."

Trei stood up slowly, surrounded.

Summer, Luna, Astrian, Claven, Yio, Vastras, and his mother. They all stood around him, watching silently. Judging silently.

Trei felt nothing.

He was empty, as he stood and sighed heavily, taking Yio's hand. The fate blushed at the surprising touch, and Trei spoke quietly, "This is not reality. You are not Yio. These are not the women in my life. These are the echos. The things I have failed to forget. That's okay. I don't want

to forget you Yio, nor any of the others. I am not forgetting you. For the future to exist, I need to come back to the present. To move beyond my past. I cannot change it. I would not change it. There has been hell and tribulations. Yet, I have adored the time I have spent with you and the rest.”

Trei let go of her hand slowly, causing her to panic and reach for him, but she suddenly found herself out of reach and stumbled, as Trei turned away from her. “The past belongs to the past. The future to the future. The now, well that... That belongs to me.”

---

## Luna

Luna blinked feeling something drip on her face. She felt panic. She felt horror. She sat up suddenly, and felt arms wrap tightly around her, holding her. She struggled to breathe, struggled to understand.

She remembered... She remembered dying. Slipping into the void.

The lifestream was gone.

She frayed and fell apart, piece by piece.

She shivered, breathing shakily, and then looked at the person holding her. Looked into those tear-filled red eyes, and then buried her head in her chest without hesitation, letting out a howl. Her hands grabbed the back of Claven roughly, pulling against her as she let out the pain. She'd died. She'd actually died. She'd been erased from reality. She'd ceased to exist.

This was what mortality felt like.

What every mortal experienced, eventually.

Nothing in her lifetimes had prepared her for that. Nothing.

A hand stroked her head gently and Luna paused, feeling instantly calm. Not as if anything was made better, but that it didn't matter as much anymore. She knew she was going to be okay. She relaxed into Claven, her fists unclenching and pulling Claven into a cuddle.

"I'm sorry."

Luna glared up at her for breaking the moment, "I've got you. That's what matters. So shut up."

Claven shook her head, "No. It's not okay. I... I lost control. I murdered people I was trying to protect. I killed the refugees. I hunted them down... I tried to kill Trei. I tried to kill Summer. I... There is no part of me that is okay. There is no part of you that should have anything to do with me. I... I just stayed to say goodbye. You'll never have to see me again."

"Fuck you." Luna growled angrily, sitting up on her knees, "You think this is what I want to hear after I'm goddamn resurrected?"

Claven looked down, balling her eyes out and Luna grabbed her hand, "If you think I'm ever going to let you go, you're an idiot. I'm the hand behind the goddamn Gardia Massacre, Claven. I killed more children than you have ever met. I know exactly what it is like to fuck up so much you wished the universe would let you die. I'm a mass murderer. I tried to push you away once, Claven. Because I know how much of a monster I am. You didn't let me. Why?"

The red-haired Fae shrugged uncertainly, "Because... Because I love you."

Luna slapped her gently, barely touching her face, making Claven look up at her in surprise, "Is your love worth more than mine?"

The Fae just shook her head, biting her lip as tears dripped off her chin and her nose began to run.

Luna wrapped her legs around Claven's waist and put her arms around her neck, "I love you, you utter idiot. I'm not letting you go, not for a damn excuse like this."

It was Claven's turn to burst out howling.

---

## Alphege

She could smell pine and woodrose. A gentle and spiced mix of fragrances tumbled from the sky, filling her senses.

Alphege sat up, gasping for breath. She exploded from the pond, grabbing the roots by the edge as she sucked in lungfuls of air. She looked up in surprise at the tree towering overhead in awe. It was Yggdrasil. Blue and green dust fell from the branches that made up the sky overhead. She could feel the roots, the life flowing through them that flowed to every tree in the entire forest. This was Eldrassa, the ancient home of her people. The root of life.

A slender hand reached out, grabbing her under the arm and pulling her up onto the bank beside the pond.

Alphege rolled onto her side, coughing up more water. Then she smiled sadly, “I have no idea how he did it. That insane man. That beautiful man.”

The elf who had saved her knelt beside her, holding a spear, “Algar returned shortly before you, mistress.”

She waved the elf away, “It isn’t mine anymore. If the spear passed to you, then the role has as well. You are now Guardian. And I . . . I am tired.”

The younger elf nodded curtly, and then looked back to the water, “You didn’t appear in the healing pools as you are, elder one. You appeared without form. You grew as a child grows.”

Alphege laughed, “So that’s it. I died, little one. I was struck down and killed in battle. It appears that there was a god watching over me.”

“Lady F’rir saved you?”

She shook her head tiredly, stifling a yawn, “His name is Trei. He was human once. He died and was resurrected. Lady Yio attempted to become his consort, knowing what he would become. It appears he has finally done it. Become the man that he could be. The god that he is. He has saved me from death.”

The elf looked at her curiously, “You speak so emotionally about one so much greater than ourselves.”

“I loved that bastard.” Alphege half-smiled, “He even helped me get dressed once. I kissed him, you know? I gave him my elfin kiss.”

The elf’s ears turned pink at that and the ex-guardian yawned, stretching, and then she curled up on her side, “I think I’ll rest here a while, if that is okay.”

“Of course, elder one.”

---



## Astrian

Astrian sniffed. She didn't want to wake up. It was warm and comfortable, and she felt as the world was wrapped around her. But the smell of maple was penetrating the cocoon she'd wrapped up around her.

She opened her eyes, glaring out of the darkness. The light filled the house she was in. Almost blindingly. The Fae sighed heavily and let the blankets wrapped around her fall off her shoulders and onto the bed, standing up stiffly and walking into the light. She groaned as the light hit her, turning to magic and tumbling from her as dust. She stiffened as her wings flared into life, reaching either end of the room as they spread. She devoured the light, as if she'd been starved of magic.

She couldn't work out her memories yet. She could remember a reincarnation. A child's memories. They were poor, and haphazard. She couldn't piece them together easily, but the child had been starving for magic. But that had to be her last life. It didn't make sense for her to feel it now.

"Oh. Sorry." A voice said from the doorway and the door shut quickly.

Astrian went bright red and flattened against a wall, her wings wrapped around her. She'd barely noticed the woman, her thoughts were so calm and full of happiness. It almost felt like background music compared to the usual tone of thoughts that raced through the world.

She looked around cautiously, looking for clothes.

Astrian felt herself get even more embarrassed as she realised she couldn't see any. She picked up the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, shuffling to the doorway and peeking out of it cautiously. She followed the humming thoughts to a woman moving around a kitchen happily. The woman was brutally scarred, head to toe. It was as if someone had tried to burn her alive. Beneath those scars, Astrian could see more. The woman was even worse off than Trei had been when she first met him.

The woman looked over, "Oh, hello dear. Breakfast is on the table."

Astrian frowned, "Umm... Do you have any... Clothes...?"

The woman rolled her eyes, "That son of mine. So forgetful. I don't have anything to fit a Fae, I'm sorry. But if you go down the hall to the room on the left, pick a dress. I'll measure you and mend it to fit you whilst you eat."

Astrian smiled nervously, "Thankyou. I'm sorry. I don't think I know you."

"No." The woman smiled happily, "My name is Valis. I am Trei'el's mother."

Astrian stifled a giggle, "His real name is Trei'el?"

Valis nodded, "Yes. I don't know why he goes around calling himself Trei, as if he belongs in an oven."

Astrian struggled to keep her face straight. She knew why. The 'el honorific had been reserved for the gods in generations past. A man who thought of himself as only average certainly wouldn't have wanted that one. His childhood must have been torture with all the teasing.

She shuffled off to find a dress before she burst out laughing.

She opened the wardrobe shuffling the dresses. They were of an older style, covered in dust. So this was Trei's mother. She seemed kind. She wondered why Trei had always been so hesitant to speak about his past, but she could guess. These dresses had been untouched for at least a decade.

Valis had died. Just like Astrian had.

She was convinced of it now.

Trei had resurrected her. Found a way to pull her back to life, without causing her to endure what had happened to Tyr.

That bloody man.

He never knew when to give up.

Astrian held up a black and white dress, blushing as she thought about Trei seeing her in it. That'd be the day.

---

## Summer

Summer breathed in deeply, sighing as she felt the light pass over her face. The light struck her skin, breaking apart as it struck the tiny crystals within it, forming the dust that covered her. Rejuvenated her.

Her wings twitched behind her, anxious to unfurl. They were feeling on the edge of cramping.

She sighed and slid forward onto the floor, stretching her wings. She lay there, her face buried in the floor, and sighed heavily. Being a grown up sucked. She wouldn't mind starting over again sometime soon. It'd cause problems, but at least she'd get a solid five years of just playing with toys and laughing.

Summer flatlined as the memories came back.

Luna dying by her hand.

Tyr gloating as he killed her.

She'd died. Actually died. Her body and her soul had been ripped apart, into the smallest fragments. Magic itself had been utterly destroyed. None of this made any sense. She could feel the sunlight on her skin, feel the dust forming on her and falling to the ground.

Summer pulled herself upright, wrapping her wings around herself, and she shuffled over to the window, and glanced out from behind the curtains.

She went white as she saw the destruction.

Her garden was dead.

The trees and bushes were char-grilled, the ground was torn apart by the footfalls of many. She'd seen enough battlefields to recognise one. Something horrific had happened here.

So it wasn't a dream. She'd already known it, but she'd hoped it.

Trei was gone.

If Tyr had killed her... Then Trei was dead. He would have attacked. And Tyr would have killed him for the insult.

She stood up, trying not to cry, and pulled on the first dress she grabbed. She moved outside quietly, trying to focus herself. To forget that she'd lost the one thing that mattered to her. It hadn't been that long ago that dealing with mortals was one of the most hated part of her day. That she'd unleashed a flurry of curses after realising she'd accidentally resurrected a mortal.

But to keep living... Without Trei... It...

She wasn't sure she could do it.

Summer shook her head, trying to stop the tears. She grabbed hold of the lifestream, of the magic. She had work to do. Repairing the garden. If she could stay focused on that, then she would be okay.

---

## Tyr

The black-eyed Fae paused, standing atop the mountain, breathing the crisp air. So this is what it felt like. To stand atop a spire of the world. To look out in wonder, rather than down in disdain.

The view was why he had come here.

He wanted this view to be his last.

“Do you really want to die?”

Tyr shrugged, sitting down cross-legged, “I’ve done too much, boy. Seen too much. There’s no erasing my crimes.”

“You could start over.”

Tyr took a deep and tired breath, “I’ve lived too long. Starting over just sounds like work. I’ve done what I wanted to. I can scarcely believe how quickly you undid it. I should have seen that coming. Should have taken into account just what I was having Vastras create. A new fate. A new god. I never saw you as someone with your path, your own destiny.”

“We write our own destinies, Tyr. You and I. No one can decide them for us.”

Tyr smiled, “No. But I’ve decided mine. I’ve had my taste of freedom, and now... Now I just want to stop. To be free of existence.”

“As you wish.” Trei answered.

---

## Yio

Yio looked up from her lounge in surprise as the figure materialised.

She'd never expected to see him here.

He stretched tiredly and relaxed backwards, a chair appearing under him as he fell, "This is a nice place, Yio."

The pink-haired woman blushed, sitting up slowly and half the naked paintings vanishing from the room, "Thanks."

"You taught me a lot." Trei yawned, stretching, "Taught me enough. You and your sisters. Taught me how to choose the path."

Yio smiled sadly, "It isn't over. It's going to be rough, living with them. Living inside time with them. Your will shapes the universe, Trei. Are you sure you can be with them?"

"Nope." Trei shrugged, "I'm not sure of anything, except that I've chosen Summer. She will be my bride, and I will be hers."

Yio felt a surge of jealousy, and her heart ache. She couldn't tell him how much she hated what he was saying. She held up her wrist, the red thread still tangled around it, "What about this, Trei?"

The man sighed, leaning forward on his knees, "What is it?"

Yio blinked for a moment. Then she almost cried.

He really had no idea, did he?

"It's... Yours." She said delicately, "You wrapped it around me. I can't break it. It's a red thread of fate. A binding of two souls, together."

Trei winced, "Oh. Crap. So you really do like me then."

Yio glared at him, "Cut the damn thing off."

"It doesn't work that way." Trei smiled glumly, "And you know it. You have to hate me for that to work... Do you, Yio? Do you hate me?"

She looked away from him, pouting.

Of course she didn't hate him. She'd interfered in the course of events for him. She'd ended up dying for him in a poor attempt to protect what he cared about. She loved him, heart and soul. Even if she knew he didn't care about her at all. He liked her, sure enough. Was even attracted to her. But there was only one person that Trei actually loved. Only one person he could see himself spending eternity with.

Trei stood up, "Well, I just came to thank you, Yio. I'd have brought a gift, but I have no idea what a Fate would want."

Yio felt her ears turn the same colour as her hair as she looked over at him nervously, "You could ask."

The black-eyed man looked at her dumbly, "There's something you want? Name it."

"I know I can't have you..." Yio started nervously, standing up slowly, "But... Can I... One... A..."

Trei smiled at her, "A kiss?"

Yio nodded quickly, biting her lip.

---

## Alphege

Alphege opened her eyes tiredly, feeling the grass pushed up against her face. A gentle hand was stroking her head slowly.

She rolled over, looking up at him.

She couldn't help but smile, her veneer of calmness vanishing. He really was the only one who could walk into a room and jumpstart all the hearts there. "Trei."

He smiled at her, "Just checking in. You alright?"

She waved to the healing pool, "I was reborn. I'm a new person. I'm not sure if alright is a specific enough term to describe what you did to me. Everything is alright. Almost."

Trei frowned, "Almost?"

Alphege sat up on her knees, leaning on them and looking down.

She knew what she wanted to say.

She didn't know if she could say it though. She whispered quietly, almost hoping that he wouldn't hear it. "From the shores, hidden by ancient mists. Born aloft by an Elfin kiss. Clear the way, and lead you home, to eternal bliss."

Trei frowned slowly, "I recognise the cadence. Sounds like an ancient song."

Alphege nodded nervously, "A promise. Between Lady F'rir, and all elfkind. Once. And once alone. We're..."

Trei lifted up her chin, making her look at him, "You brought me back with a kiss. That was a promise, wasn't it?"

She nodded nervously, "F'rir only did it, because..."

Trei smiled sadly, "Don't. Don't do it to yourself."

"I have to." Alphege winced, "I have to hear you say it, even though I know it. What I want... Is you. To stay here, to stay with me. I'm not the Guardian anymore. I can have a life. We can have a life. Any life we could want to make for ourselves."

"I don't belong here." Trei said sadly, "I can't stay in Eldrassa. I'm a god to your people. A dangerous and unpredictable one at that."

"You're not unpredictable to me." Alphege smiled sadly, "You might be a god, Trei. Or something else. I don't know. I don't care to know. I just know... I have already tried to give my life for yours. I just... I just need you to say it. Tell me there's no hope. Please."

"I'm going to marry Summer." He said without hesitation, like an avalanche crashing down on an inexperienced hiker. He told her there was no hope in unequivocal terms. Would it really have been that big a deal if he'd just... Hesitated? Just a little? Trei was as blind as ever.

Alphege nodded, unable to smile.

"You're coming to the wedding, though."

She looked up at him, "No. No way. I am not watching you marry a rival. Please."

"Already arranged." Trei said awkwardly, "I'm going to be the King of the Fae. First king in quite a while. So I may have suggested to your queen she should send an attendant to witness it. And may have suggested your name."

Alphege ground her teeth together, “Trei!”

He shrugged, “Just because I don’t love you doesn’t mean I don’t want our friendship. Sparring with. Late night talks whilst everyone else gets plastered. I don’t want that to disappear. You’re one of the few people I can talk to as an equal, Alphege. All the others. . . I always had Summer’s authority or was just another damn human to them. No one saw me as equal. Until you.”

She blew her fringe in frustration.

He was an ass.

But a kind one. “Fine. But I’m not wearing a dress. My armour will do.”

“Your armour is in the ruins Calis, where you died.” Trei said, and she frowned, “I guess I can go get it, then.”

“Yeah. . . The queen has already asked Farr to come see you.”

Alphege glared at him, “For crying out loud. You really want to see me in frills that much?”

Trei shrugged, “I guess you can ask him to incorporate steel into his dress design.”

The elf rolled her eyes and punched him on the arm, “I’m sure.”

---



## Claven

Claven raised her head as she heard a knock at the door.

“Ignore it.” Luna said with irritation, kissing around her neck, and trying to get her attention back. Claven looked down, feeling the temptation as she looked at the flushed face of her love. They were in Claven’s home, far from any prying eyes. But it could be about the water wheel, and if it was it was something she probably should deal with.

Luna bit her neck gently, causing Claven to moan unbidden, “I said, ignore it.”

Claven smiled, “Okay. For you.”

She bent down, kissing the woman, arms moving around her. Luna flipped her onto her back easily, and began kissing down her neck, down her chest.

“Ahem.”

Claven went bright red, grabbing the nearby quilt and wrapping it over the both of them. Luna spun in her arms to glare at the intruder, and paused as she saw who it was.

The black-eyed man rubbed his head nervously, “Sorry. I’m checking in on everyone. I won’t be long.”

“Come back later.” Luna growled, “Why now, Trei? It’s taken Claven all day to get in the mood.”

The redhead glared at her, “Luna!”

The princess smiled back at her sheepishly, “Well, it’s true.”

Claven pouted. She couldn’t stop Luna. Couldn’t say no to her. If she did and didn’t mean it, then Luna went right on doing whatever she wanted. Having a lover who could read your thoughts was rather interesting. If Claven said she didn’t want anything, but it was just because she had things to do but actually did want Luna... Luna just kept right on. They’d have to find a way to balance that, but this early on... Claven was willing to give her some freedom. More than willing. They’d both died. Being together was a celebration they should never have had.

And it was because of the man in front of them. That was obvious.

Trei sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed, “Well, mostly because once I’m done, I’m going to Summer. I’m sealing the realm, and none of you will be able to speak to me for a while.”

Luna grinned cheekily, “Oh. Really?”

Trei shrugged, “Isn’t that what you two are basically doing, here?”

Claven went bright red and looked down. It didn’t help. She was staring at Luna’s naked back. Not a great way to clear her head.

“So. You survived.” Luna began, “And then you went and resurrected us.”

“Alphege is in Eldrassa.” Trei yawned, “Astrian is in Calis, with my mother. Ashwen is still banished to a world beyond the void. She refused to come back... But I brought most of the others back. A few stayed. A few have gone into willing exile. Things are going to be messy on the political front.”

“Don’t care.” Luna interrupted, “Not right now. So, unless you’re going to join in, Trei, can you get the hell out?”

Claven glared at her lover, “Oi. I never said I wanted company.”

Luna looked sweetly back at her. Claven glared.

Luna's eyes got bigger.

Claven glared some more.

Trei burst out laughing, "I'll get out of your hair. Careful with this one Claven, she'll make you raw."

Claven opened her mouth, not sure what to say, but he was gone. Disappeared without magic. Just like the Fates.

She flopped back onto the bed, feeling Luna tracing her teeth on her stomach, "I'm not in the mood anymore."

Luna sighed and snuggled up beside her, drawing the blanket over both of them and wrapping a leg around her waist, "I'm sorry. I probably pushed that."

"You don't say." Claven said with a stiff jaw.

"I can't help it." Luna pouted, "He drives me just as crazy as you. And can you really say his new power isn't sexy?"

Claven looked over in surprise, "You find power sexy?"

Luna turned red, "I didn't say that."

Claven laughed, resting her forehead against hers, "Oh, yes you did."

---

## Summer

Summer's ears twitched, and she turned from where she was watering some new seed.

The man walked across the ground nearly silently. He seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. As if the entire world depended on him and what he was about to do. His black eyes were empty, swirling vast pits that drew her in. Drove all the worries out of her mind, leaving her alone, with just her and him and nobody else. No one ever again.

Trei didn't smile as he saw her, and she felt her heart faltering.

She wanted to burst into tears, to run and throw her arms around him, but that wasn't the sense he was giving off. His aura was dark and turbulent. Was he here to tell her she could never see him again? Did he even care about her anymore?

Trei paused at arm's length from her, "Summer."

"Trei." She said, her voice cracking.

He sighed heavily, "I've seen the others. They seem to be doing well. Too well in the case of Luna and Claven."

Summer wanted to laugh, but she was too nervous. Too scared of what he was saying, what he was planning to do.

"I saved you for last, Summer." He bit his lip nervously, "I saved you, because I've cut this realm off. There's no one else here. And there won't be. You can't get in and out of the garden anymore. Even the fates would find the journey difficult."

So he wasn't just abandoning her then. He was blaming her. Exiling her.

"Summer..." Trei hesitated, "Say... Something. Please."

She looked at him, tears forming in her eyes, dripping down her cheeks silently. Her throat didn't seem to want to cooperate. She wanted to say something. Convince him to stay. To stay with her. To just be her and him. That she'd give it all up for him. She'd forget being queen. She'd forget the council. She'd even run away to the human world if that is what he wanted. She just wanted him to stay with her.

He stepped closer, a hand wiping her cheek, "Sorry. This is unfair."

She couldn't help it anymore. She fell onto the ground, her legs giving out and burst into full blown tears. Sobbing and screwing up her dirt encrusted hands.

Trei sat down beside her, an arm going around her shoulders. She felt him bend her neck, putting her head on his shoulder. "I'm with you Summer. Until you're ready. I'll go when you tell me."

She glanced up at him, "What?"

Trei sighed, "You want me to go. I'll do it when you say."

"I want you to stay!" She shouted, sitting up, "I thought you came here to punish me."

He stared at her in surprise, "What?"

"You cut the realm off."

Trei scratched the back of his head, "I cut the realm off so I could be with you. So no one could interrupt us again. You sent everyone away once, so we could get to know each other before the wedding. I thought... I was doing the... Same thing."

Summer glared at him, “We have got to work on your communication skills, idiot.”

Trei winced, and then she grabbed his shoulders and shoved him onto the ground, sitting on top of his chest, “But first. Prove you still care.”

She didn’t give him a chance to protest, kissing him gently.

His hands wrapped around her, holding her close.

His tongue met hers and they danced. She felt a thrill running down her back as he explored her mouth and she explored his. The straight and flat teeth, the rise of the canines. His hands scratched down her back and Summer moaned into his mouth.

She grabbed the front of his shirt and tore it open, her hands exploring the shape, the muscles.

She sat up, breaking the kiss and breathing hard, and yanked the dress over her head.

---

## Sarin

Sarin looked at the square of light hovering in front of her, displaying the coronation of the new Faen king. He wasn't Fae at all.

It was an interesting result. Almost everyone had got what they set out to get. A few broken hearts.

Yet, hundreds had died.

So many nameless knights, so many faceless assassins. Men and women without names. Children who didn't know their own. Struck down and murdered in the chaotic violence they followed in the wake of a man whose powers outstripped her own by several orders of magnitude. He was a danger, and always would be. The balance of the universe would always tip in his favour when he desired it.

Vastras had been correct.

She had created a weapon that would eventually destroy the gods. It was inevitable. But perhaps it wasn't the worst thing in the world. Perhaps he could be the first creation of a new world. A world where no one needed gods or heroes. Where massacres were the exception, rather than the rule. A world where war had become obsolete, and all peoples could become equal.

There was opportunity there.

Risk as well.

She would tip the balance, she could not allow this opportunity pass her by.

Sarin snapped her fingers, yanking a soul out of time.

He groaned as he hit the floor in front of her, and Sarin looped a red thread around his wrist, binding him. She glared down at him, "Well then, Tyr. Welcome back."

Tyr flinched, "A Fate? But... I died. It was over!"

Sarin smiled, "But nothing ever truly ends. All actions beget the next. The sun doesn't stop shining just because you wish it would. Even if we win in the end, tomorrow will still come creeping in."

---

## Sequel

---



Figure 1: A Fate in Eldrasa